

The
**IVORY
BALL**

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THE IVORY BALL

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"I—I thought you dead"

THE IVORY BALL

BY
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IN DEFIANCE OF THE KING,
MAUDE BAXTER, Etc.

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THE IVORY BALL

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CHAPTER I

ON THE NATIONAL LINE

THE train stopped with a sudden lurch and a shrieking of brakes that startled John Laurens from his reverie and brought him to his feet on the observation platform of the rear car. Bending over the ornate railing he looked forward, and at the same time the silent man who had been his unknown companion since taking the train at Chihuahua jumped from his chair, glanced ahead and then went into the sleeper.

The train had halted in a semi-desert. To the west the mountains, barren save for a few dark patches of post-oak, lifted high and rugged against the glow of the clear evening sky; to the east the land fell away into a hopeless, melancholy waste, its forlorn appearance in no way relieved by the

silvery half moon which was turning golden in the rapidly waning light. The prospect was wan—lurid.

As Laurens looked forward he could see nothing more threatening than a tall Mexican in the everlasting peaked sombrero he had learned to detest as both unbecoming and ungraceful. The man carried a red flag and was standing on the ground by the engine, gesticulating violently in Spanish fashion as he talked to the engineer leaning from the cab window. As Laurens looked he saw the conductor run up the track and join the two and a moment later he was followed by the silent man who had just left the observation platform.

The air was startlingly quiet after the loud clattering of wheels—more than merely quiet—there seemed to be an ominous quality to the intense stillness, and as Laurens flung away his finished cigar and looked over the country, abject in its desolation, he was seized with a sudden and unaccountable depression which for a moment gave him a sense of panic—the panic of a lost child. It was like a dumb warning—a premonition of disaster which he, as a mortal, was too gross to understand.

But John Laurens was no hand to long submit to vapors. In quick contempt of what he considered

weakness he shook his broad shoulders, and, climbing the platform railing, dropped to the track and walked forward, wondering why the train had stopped. Before he was half way to the engine he met his late silent companion coming back. Neither man had spoken to the other throughout the journey; neither had made overtures to become acquainted; Laurens, because he could not speak Spanish, and the stranger because, as it proved later, he had enough to think about without being troubled by the flippancy of the average traveler.

But for all his aloofness Laurens had taken a liking for the man; for the expression of his fine face, for its clear tan, and for his well-knit figure. He had hardly thought him a Mexican, and yet he bore many of the ear-marks of the country. To Laurens' surprise he did not pass him, but halted directly in his front, and then the young man knew he was no native of the land of cactus.

"Say, stranger, I was just a-comin' for you. I takes it you belongs north o' the line." The words were in the soft drawl of the American cow-boy.

"Yes, I'm from the North. Why?" was the return.

"I savvied as much," said the other, sinking his voice almost to a whisper.

"We're both 'gringos' to these folks. And the devil's on the rampage."

"What's up?" asked Laurens in undisguised astonishment.

"Jes' step out o' earshot o' that sleeper car, pardner. Damned if I don't think Mexico is sprinkled over with ears."

To Laurens' surprise the man burst into a sudden loud laugh, as if something very humorous had struck him, and, taking the young man by the arm, drew him away from the track, still laughing as he walked.

Under ordinary circumstances Laurens would have resented both the uncalled-for laugh and the air of extreme familiarity with which he was being treated; but the occasion was out of the common and he resented neither; instead, he permitted himself to appear to be an old friend. For some reason he felt that the hitherto silent man was acting a part, and he would soon know why.

When the two had gone to some distance from the standing train the stranger's face suddenly sobered. "Pardon me, son," he began. "I wa'n't laughin' at you. An' you needn't be afeered we'll be left by the caravan; that tram won't move on in a hurry!"

"What's the trouble?" asked Laurens. "I see nothing to prevent our going ahead."

"Of course, son, *you* don't. I do. What might be your name, sir?" The question was more of a demand than a request.

"I am John Laurens, of New York."

"I took you to be of the sea, sir."

"You were right," was the return. "I was once an officer in the United States Navy."

"So! I'm Tom Melton. I got a big sheep-ranch down here in the grass region, an' Splithoof Ranch is some known in these parts. I cal'lated on gettin' off at Las Minas, but now I reckon it'll be a matter o' gettin' off alive from anywheres."

Laurens looked at him in wonder, and though his wonder was not yet tinged with alarm he knew that there was something serious in the wind. Melton no longer laughed, and though his words had the light air which seemed a part of his natural manner of speech, it was plain that he was intensely in earnest. "What do you mean? Come to the point," said the young man.

"I means this," was the slow return. "I don't savvy how you stands grief, sir, but there's merry hell to pay right now. The insurrectos have just blown up a culvert two mile north o' here. It was

savvied by that greaser track-walker talkin' to the engineer and conductor. He saw it done and he legged it back here to stop us."

"You don't mean——"

"I means, pardner," interrupted Melton, "that the greaser says the gang is waitin' for us to come up. When they saw the flag bearer an' knew he was wise to them they tried to pot him. He made out as how he was hit, an' rolls down the embankment; then bein' out o' sight, he ups an' runs again. Pretty shrewd greaser, that! He deserves a hat full of *pesos*."

"Well?"

"Well, son, now it's just a question of how long them bandits will wait for this here train afore they comes after it."

Had the quietly speaking man suddenly struck Laurens in the face he would not have staggered him more thoroughly. There was no need for the ex-officer to be told the seriousness of the situation, for to him came the vivid recollection of the fact that but the week before a party of Americans, miners and oil prospectors, had been taken from a held-up train on a branch road and shot off-hand for the simple reason that they were "damned gringos." He was also aware of the civil and military disorder of the

country, but he had never dreamed of danger on the National Main Line.

The ranchman looked hard at his companion as if to mark how the news affected him, but Laurens had been trained in the school which teaches its officers to conceal anxiety. "Is it proposed to defend the train?" he asked, assuming a calmness he did not feel.

"I don't know—nor care," was the reply; "but I'm everlastin' certain that I'm not goin' to do perlice duty for the railroad management! Say, Cap, you an' me is the only Americans on board this train! Them devils are after loot, mainly, but if they find any gringos they'll sure rob them an' then be likely to make jerked meat out o' them—especial out o' me."

"Why of you?" asked Laurens, his brain in something of a whirl.

"Because one of them land-pirates—insurrectos, they calls themselves—came to Splithoof Ranch some months ago an' lets on that he's a nephew o' that curse o' Mexico, Francisco Villa. That greaser considered himself some youth, havin' Villa blood in him, an' demands forty thousand *pesos* or twenty thousand American dollars to insure me protection from his kind. That happened just afore

trouble broke out in this section. I was some mad and acted independent, you might say. I listened to him an' then calmly refused. He began threatenin' me, but I stopped him by nachully knockin' him down an' kickin' him off the place. I was a fool for doin' it. Since then I learned that I was a marked man an' I've been warned to get out a dozen times. Final I sent my wife and kid to El Paso an' went down to Chihuahua to try to get shet o' my ranch. I've taken the warnin' an' mean to get into God's country north o' the line, if I can. Everything I have is in Splithoof, an' I nachully won't desert it until I have to. See?"

"I see. And now what's to be done?" asked Laurens, recognizing that his undeveloped sixth sense had been at work in his late sudden depression. "You and I look to be in a tight spot, if the insurrectos come down on us!"

"We're sure in a tight spot if we stay here, Cap," was the cheerful return. "But we aint sheared yct! The next collection of adobe palaces is called Montezuma, an' right southeast of it is Callahan's ranch. I know Callahan. He aint sloppin' over with the milk of human kindness, but he'll sell some hosses. My deal is to pull my freight right now—light out an' hoof it to his place, then climb a hoss

an' ride on to my own. Savvy? I advises you to cut—an' go with me."

Stranger though the sheep-rancher was, Laurens had not the slightest doubt of his truth and good faith. "How far is it to Callahan's?" he asked, steadying himself in the face of the situation.

"He's in the grass section what begins about five miles from here," was the reply. "His ranch is several yelps an' sights from this spot—say ten or a dozen miles north-east. Think quick, Cap. I wants to sneak right sharp."

Laurens' brain did some rapid work. He had no desire to figure in Northern papers as a victim of the Mexican outrage that appeared imminent. Not that anyone would mourn for him, for he was practically alone in the world, but he was young, being barely thirty, and life in its fullness had but recently opened. As an orphan he had gone through Annapolis, working with dogged perseverance, and it was not until he had received his commission as a lieutenant and made several voyages that his last remaining relative, a wealthy uncle, had died and left him an independent fortune. Until then he had not known what it was to spend a dollar, save for necessities. He at once resigned from the navy and gave rein to his passion—the only passion he

had thus far known—a love for traveling, and he had lately returned from China, going from San Francisco to Chihuahua to look after some doubtful mining interests in Mexico.

There he soon learned that as an American he could accomplish nothing at that time, and having been warned by his broker that he had better get out of that country, he was on his way.

Was it all to end by a shot from a bandit's rifle? He could and would fight, if necessary, but if he refused the ranchman's invitation he would probably be obliged to fight alone. It did not take him long to reach a decision. "It is something more of an adventure than I anticipated, but I will go with you," he said. "It seems to be the only thing to do."

"Good!" returned the rancher, his face lighting. "Are you armed?"

"I have a revolver of navy pattern in my suitcase. I presume I'll have to abandon my baggage."

"That's some better than abandonin' your life, Cap! But a suit-case ain't no place for a gun, in these parts. This is the proper action." The ranchman cautiously opened his coat and exposed a big revolver strapped under his armpit. "'You go get your iron an' be foxy about it," he continued. "You savvied me laughin' some like an idjut, a spell back,

didn't you? Well, that was for the benefit o' that long haired old fossil with a crutch what's in our car. See him sittin' at the window? You can bet nothin' gets by his optics without being seen. He's Signor Ramon Valance. I savvy him down to the ground, but him an' me don't hitch for a cuss. I wouldn't have him know what we was up to, son. You just chassay into the car and open your box easy like, an' if the old thief asks you questions you lie to him in United States talk. He don't understand it. Then you saunters out to the observation and drops off an' I'll be with you. Savvy?"

He laughed as if he were telling the best joke in the world, but Laurens now knew it was done to deceive the swarthy Mexican who was looking toward them, his white hair streaming over his shoulders. His crutches, eloquent of lameness and helplessness which, during the journey, had earned their meed of pity from Laurens, a man strong and virile, were leaning noticeably against the car window frame. The American felt a queer impulse to laugh away the warnings of the ranchman of trouble from that quarter, even while he subconsciously bowed to Melton's superior knowledge of the situation.

What trouble could come from a helpless cripple

—supposing he did have ears? Still, with the warning ringing in his brain, the former naval man felt a bit hurried as he walked back to the sleeper, but he managed to do it casually, as Melton quite as casually sauntered off in the other direction.

The old Spaniard was talking to the brakeman as Laurens went to his compartment, but neither appeared to notice him as he opened his suit-case and slipped into his pocket his revolver and a box of cartridges. Then he lounged out to the platform. For all he could see, not a soul had been interested in his movements.

With a perfect consciousness that he was accepting Melton entirely on faith and plunging into the unknown, he quietly slipped over the railing and was almost at once joined by the ranchman, who had walked around the train. There was no delay in the start, but before they had gone down the track three hundred feet they were followed by the brakeman who had been talking to the crippled Spaniard. "Where do the signors go?" he asked.

"None of your damned business," replied Melton, wheeling on him.

"No! But I fear the signors mean to leave the protection of the train," was the unruffled reply. "It is the orders that all remain aboard. You must go

back, signors; the management will not permit a risk."

"Go to the devil," returned Melton. "We ally where we wants and when we wants."

"And where is that, signors?" asked the man, his snaky smile being anything but conciliating.

"Tell Signor Valance to come and find out," was the hot return of Melton as he whipped his revolver from under his armpit. "Vamoose, you sneak. If you follow us another foot I'll blow a hole in you! Vamoose, I tell you!"

The man bowed. "The signor will probably regret his words," he responded, still smiling. "He had better have confided in me than to have spoken threats. Adios, signors."

He turned and ran back, climbed the rail of the observation platform and disappeared into the car.

"That's Valance's doings!" said Melton, catching Laurens by the arm and dragging him from the track. "Get to the sand-hills, man; a shot might come from anywhere! We've been tagged as gringos, and Ramon Valance wants to save us for the gang he has looked for!"

In a few minutes the two were out of sight from the standing train. It was fearful going in the loose soil. Melton, accustomed to riding, made hard

work of it, and Laurens, though no weakling, felt the unusual strain in less than a mile. The gulf-wind, which always rises about five o'clock and blows until nearly nine, had gone down earlier than usual, and the sailing gulf-clouds, forever a feature in the afternoons, had been dissipated. The moon hung in a sky absolutely clear and velvety, and the chill of the highlands—a chill that comes at night, even in the tropics, made exertion necessary to comfort.

CHAPTER II

AT CALLAHAN'S

IN no country on earth are there sharper contrasts in topography, character and climate than in Mexico. The temperate condition of the plateaus is met by the torrid heat of the lowlands but a few miles distant; the fertile plain is suddenly terminated by an arid waste in which life is armed at all points; the deadly air of the coast is offset by the interior which has the finest climate in the world; and from the sea to the mountain peaks the flora runs from the richest products of the tropics to the starved vegetation of the arctic zone.

And the deserts are wonderful. There the distances are glorious with color and the false promises of the mirage, for the sun plays strange freaks in the arid region. In them the conditions of contrast still holds. Those vast tracts, in which rain rarely falls and where the intensely dry atmosphere extracts every particle of moisture from the earth, may

be suddenly deluged, and the heated land show a coating of ice when that dreaded storm, the "norther," swoops down on it. In a day, in perhaps an hour, the terrible sun reappears to find the sand has lapped every drop of water, and the hell resumes its old fiery aspect. Mexico is a wonderful country, and were it properly governed and intelligently cultivated it alone might feed the world.

It was a semi-arid region over which Laurens and Melton trudged. The former never forgot that terrible walk ankle deep in the loose, yielding sand. Mile after mile they plodded until exhaustion turned them dumb, and it was after nine o'clock before they found themselves in the "grass country," which, through a freak of nature, had been thrown between two deserts. There had been no sign of pursuit and the going became easier there. Presently they struck the faint trail running north and south and it was close to eleven o'clock when they neared the ranch-house which was their destination and the first habitation they had seen.

Laurens felt ready to drop. There seemed nothing that could interest him save some place on which he could stretch his weary frame and renew himself for what a new day might bring forth. Long since he had become oblivious to the smaller things of his

surroundings. Things that had not escaped him in spite of danger were now unnoticed. Even the melding of mesquite and pampas, of blue-gray sky and dark-hued earth into the Brunette of twilight and black of night no longer insensibly roused his artist's soul. Little things—he usually thought of them, too. But there were no “little beautiful things” to a man whose feet were burning with a flame ambitious to consume his whole body.

Yet he saw one thing. A little white thing. It caught his eye in the clear moonlight and he picked it from the bush. To his surprise it was a lady's handkerchief, in one corner of which was embroidered a “J.” He halted and waited for his companion to come up.

The sheep-herder was tired to his soul and it was only fear that still drove him forward.

“Are there any women at Callahan's?” asked Laurens as his companion joined him, and speaking for the first time in an hour.

“Not on your life!” was the answer. “Callahan's is a stag outfit. He won't have a woman on the place, not even to cook. Callahan is a beast on two laigs! You'll see!”

Laurens put the little square of linen in his pocket and the two dragged on. A short time elapsed and

Melton shouted with something like a ring in his voice:

"There it is! And some eyes are open!"

He pointed to a single light in a low, adobe building which stood apart from a number of others. It was the main ranch-house nestled among a bunch of pecans and live-oaks, and the light showed with a clearness that told of its coming from an open window. Behind the house was an immense sheep stockade, now empty, and near it a corral in which were a few horses. Around the ranch on every hand stretched a fairly level country rich with grass and dotted here and there with clumps of trees. The place looked like heaven to the tired travelers. In a few minutes they stepped on to the ramada of the ranch-house and Melton knocked loudly on the door.

There was no delay in answering and the door was almost immediately opened by Callahan himself. He was a giant of an Irishman, with small red eyes and a bristling mass of iron-gray hair which gave his broad face a leonine expression. His immense figure was coarsely dressed in a red shirt open in the neck, a pair of dungaree trousers, and spurred boots. He carried a rifle ready for instant use. Though he was a fine specimen of the human animal Laurens was not prepossessed at sight of

him, and his prejudice became strengthened when the man ripped out an oath as he recognized his neighbor.

"Hell! It's ye, is it! I thought ye in the devil's care these two days back!"

There was no welcome in either his manner or his sullen tone.

Melton forced a tired laugh and introduced Laurens with a word, briefly told the events of the night and concluded the narrative with a request for horses, the Irishman all the time keeping his eyes fixed on the ranchman. He had jerked a side nod at Laurens as if his presence made little impression.

"Then ye hov heerd nawthin'?" he demanded, when the short story was completed. "An' there are things to know. Ye may come in, but by the same token I don't know where ye can slape—an' 'tis likely ye won't want to."

He led them into a good-sized room. It was sparsely and rudely furnished, there being no sign of a woman's hand in the coarse interior. In the center of the apartment was a large pine table on which an American lamp was burning, and at the table sat a youth of about eighteen dressed in a white shirt and baggy riding trousers. He was evidently finishing a meal, and standing by, as if attending

him, was a Chinaman, his eyes like two oblique slits in his fat face. Two or three saddles, an empty water-skin and a corded pack were thrown in a corner, and four or five common chairs were in evidence. A chest-like box stood on the floor. That was all; there were no pictures of any kind and the gray adobe wall was bare save for a large cupboard and a single Winchester rifle on brackets. To this room there was but one window, its inside blind of heavy oak being wide open, as was the window itself, and the four doors, including the one from the ramada, were closed, the one leading from the rear of the house being barred; the other two opened into apartments on either side of the main room. At a glance Laurens took in these uninteresting details as he entered.

As the strangers advanced the boy half rose from his chair and looked at them with wondering eyes; the Chinaman, his arms folded in his sleeves, crossed the room and squatted on the box.

"Well, Joe," said the Irishman, clapping the youth on the back with a brutal force that staggered the slight figure, " . . . here be two others like ye an' yer dad, flyin' for loife! Sit down, gentlemen," he continued, going to the cupboard and bringing out a bottle and a thick tumbler, both of

which he slid across the bare table; then he appeared to notice the Chinaman. "Git out o' here, ye domned chink!" he suddenly roared, shaking his immense fist at the Oriental, who got up and seemed to glide into one of the adjoining rooms, to which he was at once followed by the youth, who had not spoken a word.

Melton dropped into a chair and paid no attention to them, but Laurens looked after the two, as much impressed by the Chinaman's repulsive face as by the boy's ivory-white complexion. As the room door opened and closed he heard a loose, rattling cough in the next apartment, but he was too exhausted to feel curious regarding it, and seated himself near his companion. Callahan stood by the table, his post-like legs spread wide, and looked down at his neighbor.

"An' now, sor, ye had better take a snifter to brace ye agin me tellin' ye that ye be a ruined man."

Melton, already pale from exhaustion, turned deadly white. "What—what are you drivin' at?" he faltered, looking up.

"At just this," returned the Irishman, seating himself opposite the others. "Ye can climb anny hoss in my corral an' git to Splithoof Ranch—but ye had better not." He stopped, poured out half a tumbler of raw whisky and drank it down without

a wink. Melton looked at him dumbly for a moment, then almost shouted:

"Go on! Why had I better not?"

"Because," was the easy answer, "yer man Filipe rode in here yesterday noon as if all hell was after him. 'We're raided!' he yells. 'Thim devils hov killed foive hun'red shape!' says he, 'an' drove off nigh a t'ousand more!' he says. Then he tears away south as if afeered to look back. Sure, man, I learn they hov cleaned out yer hacienda an' fired ivvery thing that could burn. An' they do be lookin' fer ye this minnit. Ye can figure on what it manes if they catch ye."

Melton fell back in his chair. "My God! Cleaned out! It has come at last!"

The Irishman was not touched by his distress; he laughed in the face of the stricken man. Laurens' dislike for him turned to sudden hatred.

"That's fer bein' a gringo!" said Callahan. "Thank hiven, I'm an English subjict! They wud nivver dare do the likes o' that wi' me!"

Laurens was dumb from astonishment at the tragic news and indignant at the inhuman manner in which it had been broken. Melton looked stupidly at his host whose broad smile showed a row of tobacco-stained fangs. "What's to be done?"

What's to be done?" he repeated, like a man in a daze.

"Faith, I dunno," returned the Irishman, with the utmost cheerfulness. "I can give ye no bed here, though ye may bunk in the quarters, if ye can stan' the vermin. Not two hours ago along comes a party o' three: a Major Stillwell, his son—that boy Joe, an' the chink with eyes like knife-slits in a shape's liver. I hate the sight o' him! The major is a sick man! I' faith, he is! He fair turned me out o' me own house, sayin' he'd die on the trail if I didn't take him in. Sure, but I'll make him pay through the nose!"

He wagged his great head and laughed. Laurens remembered Melton's telling him that the man was a brute, and he would have liked to smash him in the face as he sat there as if enjoying his neighbor's distress. For a few minutes no one spoke, then Callahan squared his elbows on the table. "Now what be ye fellys goin' 'to do?" he asked. "I see but wan way for ye, Melton. If ye go north or south ye'll be caught an' shot, sure as God made lambin' time—but ye might make a try for Fort Hancock."

"Across the Flerro desert!" exclaimed the

ruined ranchman, the dazed look fading from his eyes.

" 'Tis the choice of two hells, seein' ye can't stay here! I'll sell ye the hosses, though I haven't many."

"What do you think?" asked Melton, pulling himself together and turning to Laurens. "The Flerro desert is God-forgot! To cross it would mean a matter o' sand an' heat for three days, and then——"

He was interrupted by a loud knock at the closed outer door, and before Callahan had more than risen from his chair to answer it the door opened and a man stepped quickly from the ramada. He was a young Mexican in shabby military clothing. On his head was a huge, peaked sombrero heavily ornamented with silver filigree, the heels of his dilapidated shoes were adorned with magnificent silver spurs, their hangings jangling as he walked, and thrust into a once gorgeous sash around his slender waist was a revolver. A scabbardless sword, discolored with rust, hung at his hip. As Melton caught sight of his rather handsome face he started from his chair.

"*Miguel Villa!*" he exclaimed; and stood staring at him.

"*El Capitan* Miguel Villa, signor," was the calm return, with an accent on the title. "I have great pleasure of the meeting with Signor Melton! Yes?"

The young fellow's black eyes sparkled as he bowed with the grace of the Latin, twisted the points of his slight mustache and looked around the room, his glance taking in every object. Then he turned to the Irishman. "You are the Signor Callahan? Yes?"

"That's me name," was the scowling return.

"Yes? I see that the signor has the unexpected company!" went on the intruder. "Two gringos! I did not—ah! whisky?"

Without waiting for an invitation he clanked to the table, picked up the bottle, smelled its contents, and airily lifting it to his lips took a long pull of the raw liquor. The cool impertinence of the act angered the Irishman. "By the howly powers!" he began, but was stopped by the stranger who held up his small hand to silence him.

"The signor would not be inhospitable? No? Witness the two gringos! Do they not have of the whisky? Yes! And what is the mere ceremony, signor?" He smiled, and his fine teeth gave him a lupine expression.

"What t' hell!" exploded the Irishman, his face swelling with rage; and there is no telling what he might have said had not Melton cut him off. "Rope it!" he exclaimed, pointing at the Mexican. "That's the damned hound that marked me after I marked him! Don't ruin yourself!"

For a moment it appeared as if the self-confident Mexican would fly into a fury at the open insult. His eyes sparkled ominously but he smiled broadly, as if complimented.

"So the Signor Melton now knows that *Capitan* Miguel Villa is not to be despise!" he said, in his soft voice. "But the Signor Callahan has not the fear of trouble! He is no gringo! Perhaps he is the good patriot—*quien sabe?* But, gentlemen, I am somewhat of haste in my visit. Signor Callahan, he is acquaint of Signor Melton's late misfortune which the signor brought upon himself? Yes? Let us save time to Signor Callahan. For forty thousand *pesos* such misfortune will not happen to him. Does the Signor Callahan say *mucho gusto?*"

He turned smilingly to the Irishman, twisting his little mustache.

"For-rtty thousand divils!" roared the giant. "I am an English subjiect, ye young whiffert! What d'ye mane by comin' here for money?"

"The signor knows well what I mean," was the unruffled reply. "He is in Mexico, not in England! He is friendly with these gringos? Yes? Then he must pay—— Stop, signor!" he said, his face darkening as the big man got from his chair and stepped to the corner where he had deposited his rifle. "It is best for the signor to know that I have my men posted outside. Eight men, signor. Men that obey. I take no chances, gentlemen!"

For all his gigantic frame Callahan seemed suddenly to wilt. The Mexican grinned and went on: "Now we have the complete understanding! The Signor Melton think he smart—him and his fren! But——"

"The cripple, Ramon Valance, has a long tongue!" broke in Melton, clearing himself from his chair; and now all signs of fatigue and mental distress had vanished from his flushed face.

"The Signor Valance is a good patriot!" was the reply. "This is no country for gringos, signor! You should have learned."

CHAPTER III

THE FIGHT

IT did not tax Laurens' intellect to account for the presence of the young Mexican, nor did he fail to recognize the significance of his coming. His heart began to race. It was clear that their desertion from the train had been marked by the old villain with the crutches who for reasons of his own had betrayed the two Americans to the bandits. It was equally plain that their undisguised trail had been easily followed by moonlight. What was to be the outcome? Laurens could only guess, and his guess was sinister. He quietly slipped his hand into the side pocket holding his revolver.

"An' so ye've brought yer gang down on me—on *me!*" said Callahan, his red eyes looking wicked.

The young Mexican shrugged his narrow shoulders. "We have long owed the signor a call—and the signor has the *pesos*—as we happen to know. And so has this gringo," He wheeled and pointed

at Laurens. "Signor, you are but a traveler. You have not the limber tongue and the loud voice. You shall be saved for one thousand *pesos*. Yes?"

Laurens stared at him. How did the Mexican know he had just five hundred dollars in his pocket? But before he could answer the demand the Mexican swung around to Melton and continued with quick intensity:

"Ah! But with the Signor Melton all is different. He is ruin! He cannot pay! He once kick Miguel Villa, and for that there is no price! For that—ah! we will see him outside. He shall feel the heel——"

He never finished the sentence. Melton, whose face had been working with rage, cut him off by springing at him and in an instant had him by the throat, bearing him backward before the Mexican could draw a weapon. But not before he gave a cry in Spanish, and hardly was it uttered when a jet of flame streamed through the open window, and with the report of the shot the ranchman loosened his hold and fell face downward on the floor.

Freed from his hold the young insurrecto sprang toward the door, but was met by Callahan, who planted his huge fist in the fellow's face, driving him backward and well nigh across the room, though

with the activity of a cat he kept his feet under him, and, drawing his revolver, fired at the Irishman, missing him.

Just what happened next Laurens wasn't sure. By then he was on his feet and had his revolver out. He knew there were three deafening explosions and that a shot came from the window behind him, the bullet passing close to his ear. He could remember that he jumped for the shutter and slammed it tight, and when he had gathered his disordered wits, Callahan, cursing like a pirate, was barring the heavy door, and the young Mexican, stone dead, lay on the floor near Melton.

The room was blue with powder smoke, and in the doorway of the adjoining room stood the youth, Joe, his eyes wide with fright.

As the bar of the door fell into its place the Irishman turned on Laurens, his face furious. "An' ye hadn't fired that shot an' saved me life by killin' that greaser I'd t'row ye out to them divils. Why did he come here an' bring this on me?"

The young man was seeing red. He glanced at the still smoking weapon in his hand and realized that he had taken a prominent part in the short fracas. The fact that his brains were now on an even keel did not lessen his anger toward the brute

that threatened him and whose life he now knew he had saved.

"You're a fool!" he snapped back. "I have a shot or two left. Try to throw me out, if you think it advisable; I'd as soon put an end to you as to the boy on the floor!" As he spoke he raised his revolver.

Even if Callahan had not possessed policy he had no time to answer the defiance, for at that instant there came a shot from outside and a bullet penetrated the planking of the door, showing its nose through the double boards but not coming into the room. It seemed to bring the Irishman to his senses.

"Faith, but ye're a man of spirit!" he cried, reaching for his rifle. "Fight? Hell! I know ye will; an' ye'll hov fightin' enough without gettin' red-headed over me! I'm mad, man! I look to be ruint, as was Melton! Thim divils hov tasted blood an' will be afther the hearts av us. They'll run ivvery horse I hov in the corral! Whist! Bar the dure after me—I'll out an' 'rouse the han's, though I fear they'll lay down on me. Jump fer the major's room an' see 'tis tight."

Callahan ran to the back door and, throwing off its bar, disappeared. Almost mechanically Laurens

fastened it behind him. Whether he had been deserted from cowardice, or not, he could not know, but he knew he had been left alone to face the situation in the house and work out his own salvation. There seemed but one way of doing it, and that was to defend the building as long as possible. And he knew he was not left alone; there was a man called the "major," the boy and the Chinaman. He might make a good showing, if backed by the three with spirit.

After barring the door behind the Irishman, and hearing nothing from outside, he examined his surroundings. First he looked into the room opposite the one in the doorway of which the boy was still standing like a person overcome by what he had witnessed. It was a small bedroom with a window in the rear, and, like the rest, had a heavy window shutter. Beside a bed there was a cheap washstand with a bowl on it, while on the floor was a bucket of water. Nothing else was in the apartment. Laurens fastened the shutter and brushing past the youth, who in his present state appeared useless, he entered the room behind him. The boy hardly moved, standing like one dazed by terror, his eyes fixed on the two bodies on the floor. For all the prevailing quiet outside Laurens felt that something

would soon happen. He moved quietly but quickly.

There was a single window and a back door to the room he entered and to his relief both were shut and fastened. This he determined at first glance; the second showed him a middle-aged man lying on a bed, and though the air of the place was close and foul, a burning lamp making the heat intolerable, he was covered with a heavy Navajo blanket. He coughed as Laurens entered, and one look at him showed the young man that he was an invalid far gone in consumption. At the bedside was the Chinaman, his placid countenance as expressionless as a pan of grease as he stood with his arms folded in his long sleeves. The man on the bed turned a scared, white face on the American. "What—what does all the shooting mean?" he gasped.

"Nothing far out of common in this part of the world, I imagine," returned Laurens. "The house has been attacked by insurrectos, so-called—bandits, in fact. You are Major Stillwell, I believe."

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Lieutenant John Laurens, lately of the United States Navy; an American, and like yourself, a refugee. My companion has just been killed and I have shot the leader of the gang. Callahan has left us, whether permanently or not I can't say. We are

beset from outside and are in a desperate situation, sir."

"Your case is not as desperate as mine!" was the feeble return, as the major laid a thin hand on his chest and coughed. "I——"

He was interrupted by a smashing of glass followed by a bang on the window shutter—a bang that started the oak planks, though they still held together. The blow was accompanied by the shrill shouts of four or five men.

In an instant Laurens swung around and sent a bullet into the woodwork and the crash of the lead was followed by a scurrying of feet on the ramada. Then again silence fell but it brought no sense of security. Through the attack and the deafening explosion of Laurens' revolver the Chinaman did not turn a hair, though at the shock the major groaned and nearly fainted.

Laurens knew he could not defend the whole house alone and it was plain that the major could be of no help nor could the apparently panic-stricken boy be relied upon; but there was the self-contained Chinaman.

He held out the revolver.

"Here, John! You take gun. Kill any man break through window. Sabe?"

To his astonishment the man did not move, only looking at him through his slits of eyes. Yet Laurens felt that he was understood. "You fight?" he demanded, stepping toward him. The Oriental slowly shook his sleek head but otherwise did not stir or make an answer.

"You cursed son of a slant-eyed rat-eater!" exploded Laurens, carried away by disgust; and he was about to say more when he was stopped by a touch on the arm, and turning found the boy at his side.

"You will gain nothing by cursing Fung Wang," he said, without the least excitement. "He will not fight. Give me the revolver and tell me what to do. Wang, look to the major." This last to the passive Oriental. He at once turned to the gasping sick man who looked like death.

Laurens was astonished at the boy's calmness as well as his sudden change. "You are a game lad, Joe," he said, wondering what kind of people these were, not to become excited under the existing conditions. "You have only to guard the window and door. I will be in the next room." And with that he handed him the revolver and went out. After taking the Winchester from the wall and making sure its magazine was full he bent over the body of

Melton, hoping against hope that he was still alive, but he was as dead as the Mexican beside him. Even then Laurens thought of the "wife and kid" who were doubtless waiting at El Paso for the coming of the husband and father, and perhaps they would never know the cause of his delay.

But he had scant time for soft musing; even as he straightened from the corpse of the man he had known but a few hours there came the sound of a shot from the rear of the house, followed quickly by another as if in answer and then two more. After that silence again fell—a brooding silence which in itself was like a threat. Laurens' nerves were on the *qui-vive* and inaction was unendurable. He knew nothing of what was going on outside and the uncertainty was more than flesh and blood could bear. This was not fighting; to him it savored of retreating to a hole, rabbit-like, and waiting for the hunter to be discouraged, or to his submitting to be smoked out or dug out. The position did not suit Laurens' now aggressive spirit, and in a desire to learn the course of events he blew out the lamp and quietly unfastening the window shutter, which was breast-high from the floor, cautiously looked out.

The moon was tipped on the edge of the distant mountains, but there was sufficient light for him to

make out the shadowy forms of a number of horses picketed beyond the pecans, but not a man could he see. There was no encouragement in the outlook; the bandits had not retreated, nor did he think it likely they would be beaten off, they knowing the slight force garrisoning the ranch-house. Though the young man now had a grip on himself, in his heart he did not expect to escape from the trap he was in; the chance of being helped was small, for he knew enough of the peon character to believe that not one of Callahan's men would lift a finger in defense of the ranch against the insurrectos, peons like themselves. There certainly had been no indication of resistance. As for the Irishman, he might have taken a horse and ridden to safety, for all that Laurens knew to the contrary. He had no faith in Callahan's bravery in a combat like the one in hand.

In the darkness he opened the crystal of his watch and felt of the hands, making out that it was about one o'clock. There was not a sound to break the heavy silence, save when the consumptive coughed in the next room. The chill of the night together with the long walk, no food, and the result of his excitement, made him shiver in spite of himself. He thought of the whisky bottle on the table and was about to go for it when, just as he was in the act

of turning from the window, the outside gloom was cut by two flashes from a mesquite bush not ten paces from the ramada, and two reports rang out in quick succession.

In an instant Laurens raised his rifle and fired at the spot, immediately slamming closed the shutter, the crash of the wood being followed by a cry and a heavy fall in the next room.

Instinctively the young man seemed to know what had happened and he hurried to the adjoining apartment. As he threw open the door he saw that the lamp was still burning, the window shutter was thrown open, and on the floor, near the bed, lay the boy. The Chinaman was crouched in a corner. As the boy saw Laurens he tried to rise but fell back unconscious. The ex-officer's mind being trained for emergency, he acted almost instinctively. Instantly blowing out the light he ran to the window and carefully lifting his head above the sill, looked out. The figure of a man was rolling on the grass near the mesquite bush and two others were running toward the horses. As quickly as he could pump the rifle he sent two shots after them, then refastened the shutter against a return volley.

But there came no return volley. A few minutes of intense waiting passed, then he relighted the lamp

and bent over the fallen boy. The man on the bed moaned; the Chinaman remained motionless and imperturbable. He had risen to his feet and stood against the adobe wall. With an effort the major tried to sit up but failed. "Is—is he dead?" he gasped.

"No," snapped Laurens. "How in the devil did this thing come about? Who opened that shutter while there was a light in this room?"

"I—I don't know," was the return. "I—I was speaking to Joe when the shots came. Before God, I don't know. I—I think——" He seemed to collapse, for his voice trailed off to nothing and he closed his eyes.

Laurens had no time to attend to him. "Look after your master, you cursed image," he shouted to the unmoved Chinaman, and, lifting the slight figure of the boy, he carried it out and into the little bedroom. A few minutes later, there being no further alarm, he got the lamp going and looked for the boy's injury.

He found it readily enough—a clean bullet hole, like a blue mark, through and through the fleshy part of the left shoulder. It was by no means a serious wound, and it showed that the youth had fainted only from shock. But when the young man

tore down the shirt to get at the wound to dress it, he gathered his brows, bit his lip and looked sharply into the unconscious face. The line of the shoulder, the delicate flesh, and the rounded curve of the breast told him a story. Laurens was a trifle startled.

For the boy was a girl!

A girl of about eighteen; the blood-stained bosom clearly proclaimed the fact.

Here was a mystery, but the young man lost no time in trying to penetrate it. Washing the wound with water from the bucket on the floor he bandaged it with strips torn from the pillow-case and had barely completed the hurried dressing when he heard Callahan thundering at the front door. He knew then that the stress had passed. Throwing a sheet over the unconscious form he ran from the room and admitted the Irishman into the house.

Callahan was excited. "They've gone!" he shouted as he entered. "Ivvery domned greaser has pulled his freight! I saw thim go north an'—— What's this?" he demanded, as he marked the light moved to the little room and caught sight of a figure on the bed.

Laurens briefly told him what had happened, but suppressed his recent discovery. Callahan gave an

uninterested grunt. Going to the table he took a drink from the bottle, then stepping to the body of the dead Mexican he gave it a vicious kick. "Ha, ye dog! Ye got yer *pesos*, didn't ye!" He turned to the disgusted American. "Ye be a dead shot an' a quick wan," he said. "I got two o' the gang at the corral though they managed to run three hosses, an' there's wan o' your work lyin' out front beyant the bush. That makes nigh half o' thim!"

"Then you think we are safe?"

"Safe—hell!" roared the other, fixing his red eyes on Laurens. "Open the dure an' lave me t'row out this coyote meat." With that he caught the two dead men by their collars and dragged them from the room with no more consideration than though they were the bodies of slaughtered sheep.

CHAPTER IV

THE IVORY BALL

LAURENS dared not protest at the man's inhumanity, realizing that he was more or less at the Irishman's mercy. His own position rendered him politic, while the plight of the major and the pseudo boy would be made worse if he came into open conflict with his host. Of the Chinaman he gave no thought. He shut his teeth hard and when Callahan disappeared and did not at once return he went back to the little bedroom and managed to get a few drops of whisky between the lips of the still unconscious girl. As he marked signs of returning life he heard a slight noise and looked up to see the Oriental standing in the doorway, his arms still folded in his sleeves, his fat face as blank as ever. Laurens had only a feeling of disgust for the man and yet there was something about the fellow which made him think of a volcano with hidden fires ready to burst out and overwhelm—an air of intense repression—something

beyond mere calmness. The American could not see into the eyes masked in rolls of fat lids.

"Major-man, him belly sick," said the Chinaman, barely moving his thick lips. "Wantee see doctler-man. You go?"

Laurens had an inspiration. "You know boy is girl?" he asked. The Celestial gravely nodded.

"Then no tell Callahan. He hates towkina. No place here for towkina. Sabe?"

Again the unemotional nod.

"Then you take chair and stay here by girl. You call me chop when she wake. Sabe?"

Something like a spasm went over the placid face, but the man nodded again.

Laurens went into the sick man's room. At a glance he saw that the major had been having a hemorrhage. The dying man looked up, but was unable to speak; his pulse was fairly fluttering from weakness and death was on his haggard face. The ex-officer read the signs plainly, but there was little he could do—nothing, in fact, but give him a stiff dose of whisky in order to revive him temporarily. This he did and waited for the effect. Presently Major Stillwell felt the lift of the stimulant.

"I have—had another hemorrhage," he whispered.

"It is quite evident, sir."

"Is—is my son dead?"

Laurens had no desire to probe into the mystery surrounding the sex of the girl, nor had he any wish to conceal the truth. "Major Stillwell," he said, going straight to the point, "there can be no use in attempting to deceive me. Your son is a girl. I discovered the fact while dressing her wound which is in itself superficial. As for the rest, I know nothing save that the attack on the house has ceased and the bandits have gone."

His words seemed to help the sick man. "Thank God for that!" he exclaimed; then after a moment: "I—I am glad you know—about Josephine. It makes it easier to tell you." His voice grew stronger as the whisky worked,

"To tell me what?"

"Sir," was the return, "you are a man of experience. I must trust you. I am dying, sir. What will become of Josephine in this land of anarchy?"

It was a problem the young man was in no position to answer. Major Stillwell looked up at him with appealing eyes and presently went on with more vigor:

"Fung Wang is—well, you know the Chinese nature; it is intensely selfish and I would not trust

a woman with him. And Callahan—God! What an unfeeling brute!” He stopped to cough, and then continued: “But you are a gentleman, educated and refined. You will not wholly desert her. For the love of God, promise me to protect her until she gets from this cursed country.” The man was becoming agitated.

“I can only promise to do my best for her, sir. I will not desert her, Major,” answered Laurens. The dying man grasped his hand, his own being already cold. “Then I have your word of honor. But—but I am no major, sir. A title commands respect in this country. Little else does. No matter! I am only a business man—a jeweler—an expert on precious stones. I—— I—— Could I see Josephine for a moment? My God, I must! I must confess to her—— I must tell her!”

Laurens marked the man’s growing excitement, and it was plain that something was troubling his mind.

“It is impossible to see her at present, sir. She is unconscious from shock.”

“And I cannot go to her! Oh, my outraged Heavenly Father! Give me the box—under my pillow.”

Laurens had seen men die, but never one with

his conscience galling him, and the mental distress of the sick man was more tragic than his impending dissolution. But the cause was not the business of the American. He reached under the pillow and found a small, plain teakwood box; it was some three or four inches square and had a brass handle on the cover. As Stillwell saw it he snatched at it and hugged it to his chest, his thin hands clutching it with the grasp of a miser. "My God!" he exclaimed. "How can I let it go! How dare I tell you!"

"You are not obliged to tell me anything, sir," returned Laurens soothingly, though his curiosity was fairly roused.

"I must—— I must!" whispered the other, shaking as if palsied. "The—the stone is of fabulous value! It is for Josephine. You must give it to her, and you must tell her——"

"What shall I tell her?" asked Laurens, as the man hesitated. He feared the invalid would pass away before he could deliver his message.

"The—the secret. I—I will show you. Open it—open it!" He held the box toward the young man; his hands were shaking, his eyes shining. Laurens began to doubt his sanity.

The cover was fastened with a lock, the key being

attached to the handle by a light chain. Laurens unlocked it and the top was thrown up by a concealed spring, exposing an ivory ball embedded in a bed of crimson velvet. But it was not an exact sphere, being slightly ovoid, and its substance was black with age. Laurens took it out, the dying man rubbing his hands in subdued ecstasy.

On one end of the semi-sphere and ornamenting the head of a wonderfully carved dragon was a fair sized diamond of unusual cut, but the young man, who had traveled in the East, could see nothing of remarkable value in the gem which he figured might be worth five hundred dollars, at the most. The major's rhapsody regarding its fabulous value he took to be due to mental weakness.

But, aside from the stone the ball itself was a wonder, the beautiful work on it being too delicate to follow without the closest scrutiny. Laurens had seen many remarkable Oriental carvings, but none like this; it was the most exquisite that had ever come under his eye, and it needed a strong magnifying-glass to bring out its details. Each tiny scale on the writhing dragon stood clear from its fellow, and the tracery of vine and flower was beautifully defined on the polished background, though there was but little that had not felt the tool of the carver,

'Along an intricately twisted scroll were some fine Chinese characters and the whole was a mass of marvelous work—the puerile work of some Oriental artist who must have devoted his life to it.

"It is a wonderful *ojimi!*" he exclaimed, for a moment forgetting the imminence of death.

"It has a—a secret!" whispered the dying man, as he stretched out a claw-like hand for the ball. "I must tell—Josephine! I—have deceived her! I cannot die before she—knows!"

"It is impossible," returned Laurens. "I will be frank with you, sir. If you have anything to say you must say it at once. I am an honorable man and will serve you, if possible."

The other looked up with a pitiable expression in his dimming eyes. "Tell—her—— Tell her——"

He stopped as he was attacked by another fit of violent coughing which racked the emaciated body. Laurens passed his arm under him to lift him to a sitting position, and as he did so the ball fell from his lax hand, his head sagged forward and his jaw dropped. With a glance Laurens knew the man had passed away.

He was neither surprised nor shocked. He eased the dead man to his back, picked up the ball, replaced it in the box and was about to leave the room

when the Chinaman appeared at the door. As he saw the box in the young man's hand he halted, then suddenly bent so low that his shaven head almost touched the floor, his black queue whipping out like a lash.

"Your master has just died," said Laurens, without appearing to notice the deep salutation. "Cover his face." But the fellow made no immediate movement to obey and the American passed out without being aware of the repeated genuflexion made by the Celestial, nor was he aware of the snake-like glitter of the narrow eyes.

Not greatly to his surprise Laurens found the girl leaning on the edge of her low bed, one hand playing over her bandaged shoulder, a dazed look in her fine eyes.

"I am con—confused," she began. "I must have fainted."

"You did," returned the young man, smiling.

"I—— I don't understand how——"

"It is not necessary that you should, at present; but you were shot through the shoulder."

"And you did this?" she asked, her pale face suddenly flaming, as she touched the bandage.

"I did," was the blunt retort. "And I learned you were not a boy. I have no apology to make

under the circumstances, but you need not let my knowledge trouble you. I advise you to continue being a boy as long as you are here. Discussion of my reasons is not so important now as what I must tell you. Your father just died. I was with him."

If Laurens looked for an outburst of surprised sorrow or tears he was disappointed. The girl did not start; she did not even show regret, to say nothing of grief.

"Did he tell you he was my father?" she asked calmly.

"He called you his son."

"But he was not my father; he was my father's half-brother. I had no affection or even regard for him, nor he for me. We both understood. For the time each was necessary to the other."

"Yes! I can surmise that from a few words of his—at the end when he tried to speak. But it came suddenly when he was trying to tell me something regarding this——" Laurens held out the box containing the ivory ball, and the girl's eyes opened wide at sight of it. Before she could speak, could question, the man went on:

"He told me to give it to you, and intimated he had something to confess. He gasped something

about a secret connected with it, and I am certain the confession was on the tip of his tongue when he was taken with the final hemorrhage which took him off."

The dilated pupils of the girl's eyes as she had first looked at Laurens and the box he held, narrowed to pinpoints of questioning.

"He had this?" she asked.

"He had it—under his pillow—and——"

"Then he had stolen it! It is mine! I thought I lost it weeks ago!"

"In that case of course you know the secret."

"No, I do not," she answered. "I know little more than that my father obtained it while we were in China shortly after the Boxer troubles. I was very young then—too young to be taken into any confidence of his. When we met my uncle Stillwell in Guanajuato, he was traveling for his health. I know my father told him of some secret he had discovered in connection with the ball. He was about to tell me, too, when he died suddenly from a stroke of apoplexy. I know, too, that the man, a drunken German, from whom my father purchased this for a small sum, was killed soon after parting with it. Fung Wang, who has been with us ten years and remembered all the circumstances of our Chinese

trip, told me that. There is something strange about it. My father hinted that some day it would make my fortune, but how——”

She broke off with a mirthless laugh and a shrug.

“Well,” declared the man, “if there was a secret that would romantically come up to what fictionists tell of Chinese *ojimis*, and such, and make your fortune, I’m afraid you’re due to lose it, for it looks as though the secret had finally died with your uncle, Miss—Miss——”

“My name is Josephine Dalzell,” she volunteered. “My father was a retired colonel of the United States Army, and had a passion for traveling. I have no mother, and now no relative. As for the secret dying—I believe Fung Wang knows something of it. Once he saw the *ojimi* in my father’s hand and at sight of it he bowed to the floor, but he would never tell us why.” She spoke with a naivete that was feminine and attractive.

“When Fung Wang saw it in my hand he did the same to me,” said Laurens, handing the box to the girl. “May I now ask why you adopted boy’s clothes?”

“My uncle advised it, and I was willing. We were in a rough community and a rough country and had much riding to do. There were both danger

and inconvenience in my own costume. I fare better——”

“I see!” interrupted Laurens, as he marked the increasing color in her cheeks, and was about to tell her to talk no more, when he heard Callahan on the ramada.

“Lie down! Quick!” he exclaimed. “You had better not be open to that brute’s insults. And you have not recovered—you are feverish.”

The girl obeyed, and Laurens left the room, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER V

THE RESPITE

CALLAHAN came in, his face black with anger, but before he could explode Laurens spoke. "The major is dead," he said.

"Thin th' major should thank God fer that same!" returned the Irishman. "D'ye know what we're up ferninst?" Without waiting for a reply, he burst out into a recital of his own troubles.

"Not a man left on the place save me runt av a cook, an' he's scared stiff. Me foreman, Dominick, an' ivvery peon, except thim out on range, have desarted an' gone off wid thim divils. To-morrow I ride south after the rest of me han's. Do ye want to go wid me?"

"But the boy can't travel, and——"

"Damn the boy!" was the scowling return. "Lave him an' the chink take their chances wid me cook."

Laurens did not hesitate. The thought of leaving the wounded girl to the mercy of the Chinaman

decided him. He did not have to remember the promise he had given to the man lying dead in the next room. "I will stay here, Mr. Callahan." The Irishman looked him up and down. "Ye be a domn fool!" he exclaimed disgustedly, and swung from the room.

Laurens was in no shape to meet any new emergency that night, and fortunately none arose. In a state of utter exhaustion he threw himself on the floor and slept the sleep of health and fatigue. And all the following day his brain was fogged with drowsiness. He saw little of Callahan; he ate something brought by a diminutive Mexican with a face more like a monkey's than a man's, and paid him liberally for future attention, for which the dwarfish peon was ready to kiss his feet. He attended the girl and marked her increased fever, but in spite of it she refused to remain in bed. When at noon the pseudo major was buried with the help of the cook there was no other ceremony than a simple kiss on his white forehead, given by his half-niece—a kiss of forgiveness, she said.

Then Callahan went off without even a farewell, careless alike of the comfort and safety of his uninvited guests, and for three days Laurens practically owned the abandoned ranch, his only respon-

sibility being the girl's health, and that was improving, in spite of her lack of caution.

Under the conditions the two naturally became friendly, and it was then that Laurens wondered how he could ever have mistaken his companion's sex, for even in her male attire she now showed the feminine traits and graces which characterize the refined woman. That she was both his social equal and his equal in quick intelligence Laurens was not long in discovering, and it was a delight to him when she sensed some fine point or smiled a wan smile at some joke he made for her entertainment. She was still very weak as a result of her fever and the young man treated her as if she were a child; but he would sit at the table and look at her, mentally picturing her with her dark and wavy hair grown to normal length, her lithe person clothed in proper costume, her round cheeks again aglow, and her brown eyes lighted with interest. It was an attractive vision and the basis of it was there. At those times Laurens felt a strange warmth around his heart.

During those three days the two grew to feel as if they had known each other as many months. They told of the main events of their lives and travels; they talked of almost everything under the

sun, avoiding only the personal touch of things that were so near both of them without them realizing it. It was understood that the first concern was for her to regain her strength; the second for both to get into the United States; but the time to consider how best to get there had not yet arrived, seemingly.

Laurens had not had time to consider his real opinions concerning Josephine Dalzell. He would have laughed at the idea, put bluntly by any one, that she could, and did, in this short length of time, mean more in his life than any other woman he had ever known. He knew that she interested him a great deal. He knew that they were comrades in distress, and that she had aroused all his chivalry by her helplessness. But he had no real knowledge about the girl. All that he really knew of her from her slight confidences and his own observations was that she was an attractive and educated young lady, confessedly alone in the world. She had friends in San Francisco, she had said, and felt sure she would be amply provided for on her arrival there.

What Miss Dalzell knew was that her comrade was a gentleman—a man of the world and at home anywhere in it, knowing England, France and Germany as well as he did his own country, and having

more than a smattering of China and Japan; that his friends were few, his acquaintances many, and she surmised from her own instinct and his conversation that he had probably never been entangled in any affair of the heart. She appreciated his treatment of her, too, and the fact that he had made no attempt to push her confidence.

They were sitting on the ramada on the evening of the third day, watching the flight of the gulf clouds and the changing colors of the distant mountains. Both were inclined to be silent. Those days and such evenings were making a halcyon epoch in their lives. Finally Laurens pointed to where a bullet had drilled a hole in the adobe wall of the building, and indicated the smashed window in what had been the "major's room."

"How came that shutter open at the time you were wounded?" he asked.

"I hardly know," she replied. "My uncle had called me to him and I spoke to him. Then I heard the shutter open. As I turned to learn the cause I was shot. That is all I remember."

"Do you think it was the Chinaman who deliberately opened it, to take a chance to peek out or something?" was Laurens' query.

For a moment she seemed to be in deep thought, and her forehead wrinkled as though those thoughts were not welcome ones.

"I've been thinking," she said finally, "thinking and wondering. If Fung Wang opened that shutter purposely for me to be killed, I cannot make out his reason, and yet it seems—— Oh, I can hardly believe that," she added wearily. "Why should he have wanted me killed?"

Before Laurens could express his indignation of the suspicion she had roused against the Oriental, he was stopped by the sight of two horsemen who came tearing along the trail beyond the pecans. They were coming at full speed and he instantly recognized one as Callahan, the other being a Mexican, as he knew by the flying serape and uncouth sombrero. The young man's heart jumped. Men do not ride like that unless something serious urges them. The Mexican turned from the trail, speeding toward the corral and quarters, but Callahan came straight on to the house, reining in on reaching the ramada, his horse sliding in the abruptness of his halt.

CHAPTER VI

THE FLIGHT

HE did not dismount, and his face was aflame with hurry and excitement, as it had good cause to be.

"So ye're still here! Hurry!" he shouted. "Yonder goes me foreman, Dominick. He overtook me two miles down the thrail, him ridin' like the wind. He tells me that the divils do be comin' back this night to clane me out, kill ivvery soul an' bur-r-n ivvery buildin' to pay for the work ye did to young Villa! They're but tin miles off—fifty o' thim!" The words poured from him in an unpunctuated stream.

Laurens sprang to his feet.

"What are you going to do?" said he, his tones tense.

"Do? There be but wan thing to do. We can't defend the house agin the rush av thim! We've got to git out—an' domned sudden! And there's but one chanct," he yelled, wheeling his horse. "We've

got to aim fer Fort Hancock. 'Tis across the hell o' the Flerro desert."

"Across the desert!"

"Aye, where else? An' ivvery wan fer himself. There'll be no chuck-wagon, so ye'll hov to rustle yer own grub, if ye can find it. I've no horse for ye, but the bhoy has the major's outfit an' he'll loan ye the old man's mule."

He spurred his mount and disappeared behind the house.

The suddenness of it all came upon Laurens like a clap of thunder. He turned to the girl. Her face had lost its last trace of color and she was trembling.

"We must get ready at once," said the young man, speaking sharply.

"Can—can I make the ride?" she faltered. "I am very weak; it is over the desert, and Flerro is terrible."

"I know. But it would be more than terrible to remain here," returned Laurens, tingling with excitement as he pictured the bandits hurrying toward the ranch. "Neither hell nor high-water can shake off the devils this time! The place is doomed! You must go—or I must stay here with you. I promised your uncle not to desert you, and—and I have a selfish interest. Will you trust yourself with me?"

As he spoke the color came back to her cheeks in a rush. She gave him one glance. "I will go," she said.

The tragic situation was one to which the ex-naval officer had been schooled to meet. He knew that there were but few preparations which could be made for the flight, but he was on edge for fear the Irishman should go before he and the girl could get ready. With his own hands he raided the cook's quarters, everything being thrown open; with his own hands he filled the sheepskin water-bag and fastened it on the pack-horse belonging to Miss Dalzell. He was aware that unless the party struck a water-hole the supply would last but twenty-four hours, and Melton had mentioned the journey to Fort Hancock as being a matter of three days.

In what he did he had no help, for the calm-faced Chinaman would not lift a finger for him. Laurens cursed him up and down as the fellow went about providing for himself, doing it without hurry. The unmoved Celestial completed his own arrangements and before his mistress was mounted he came from the house, got on his horse and took the reins of the pack animal, looking as stolid and undisturbed as an ox.

It was nearly eight o'clock when the last thing

was done. Laurens lifted the girl to her saddle, and then Fate put a question into his head. "Have you the ivory ball?" he asked in a low voice.

She looked startled. "No," she whispered. "In my hurry I forgot it. Last night I hid it under the mattress of my bed."

Laurens looked toward the corral where he saw Callahan gesticulating to his foreman and the monkey-faced cook. They had not yet mounted and he knew he had a few moments to spare. Without a word he ran back into the deserted ranch house and by the sense of feeling, for the interior was dark, he found the box. Why he opened it at that time he could not have told, the box not being his, but open it he did, and his fingers felt only the velvet lining.

The box was empty. The ball was gone.

As Laurens realized this he was suddenly seized with the same sense of impending disaster which had beset him on the stoppage of the train. For a moment he stood in the dark room trembling like a frightened child, and then he heard the Irishman calling. With a curse for his own weakness he thrust the box into his wide pocket, ran out and climbed into the saddle of the great Spanish mule which had belonged to Josephine's uncle.

He did not once speak of his discovery. In the face of the tragic outlook the loss of the ball did not appear to be a matter of paramount importance.

A few moments later the group of doomed buildings was left behind, every window and door being closed to make it appear that the place held its garrison for defense. It was Laurens' idea. The bandits would approach cautiously, and the longer they maneuvered around the empty house the longer their delay in pursuit.

To save their horses for the future they went over the grassland at an easy pace, Callahan riding well ahead and forever looking back as if in fear. It was a fair country through which they passed under the mellow light of a nearly full moon swimming in a deep blue sky.

Mile after mile they went without a sign of being followed by the bandits and with hardly a word spoken, and when it at length became certain that they could not be overtaken that night the young man drew his mule close to the girl's mount. "I have the box you forgot," he said, in a guarded voice. "Are you sure the ball is in it?"

"Absolutely. I was looking at it last night. You found it under the mattress?"

"Yes. Would you care very much if the ball were lost?"

For a moment she appeared embarrassed, wetting her lips, then, as if in desperation, she answered: "I would, indeed. It was my father's only legacy to me. To be frank with you, Mr. Laurens, I hope and expect to find its true worth and sell it. I will need the money. I have less than a thousand dollars in the world."

"Pardon me—but your uncle——"

"Had exhausted his means and was traveling on the money I loaned him. Of course that is lost. He promised me great things as soon as we reached New York."

It was too delicate a subject to pursue with good taste. Laurens changed it. "Did you make your own bed this morning?" he asked

"No. Fung Wang offered to and I let him. He is not my servant, you know; after my father's death he became my uncle's valet." She suddenly turned to him. "Mr. Laurens, you are hiding something from me! You did not find the ball!"

"No. The box was empty."

"Then Fung Wang has it! He has stolen it, else he would have told me."

"I believe you are right," returned Laurens, "and

if he has it, as he probably has, it is far from being lost. Trust me; I will get it from him if I have to take his fat life with it."

"You will use force? But Fung Wang will not fight."

"I don't care what he does," said Laurens, setting his teeth. "If he has the *ojimi* I will have it from him."

Laurens had an intense dislike for the Oriental and would have welcomed a bout with him, though he could not force one. That he had taken the ball the young man had not the slightest doubt; the Chinaman's actions at sight of the box had showed his great interest in it; but what it was to him and why he ran the risk of almost openly stealing it were mysteries.

Four mortal hours they rode on without a halt. Gradually the trees became scarcer and smaller, giving place to stunted shin-oak. Patches of sand and bunches of cacti appeared, while the grass grew thinner and poorer and the skinny grease-wood became a feature. They were nearing the arid land lying east of the sheep country, which stretches its inferno clear to the banks of the Rio Grande.

Absolute silence had fallen on the whole party. The air had grown fairly cold but was without brac-

ing quality. Several times Laurens saw the girl reel in her saddle, but she always greeted his inquiring look with a wan smile and a shake of her small head. He admired her grit, for he knew she must be suffering from weakness, if not pain.

At midnight, to the great relief of all, Callahan halted to let the animals have the last of the grass; and it was full time, as it had become plain to the man from the north that the girl could not hold out for another mile without rest. Her face in the moonlight was like chalk, and as he lifted her from the saddle she almost fainted. She was completely exhausted, but not a word of complaint passed her white lips; and she almost instantly fell into a deep sleep under the blanket he tucked around her.

But there was no sleep for Laurens just then. He had his work cut out. After picketing the mule he looked around for the Chinaman, who had always trailed, but he was nowhere to be seen. Thinking he might have staked out his own horse and the pack animal near where Callahan had settled down he walked over the low divide. The Irishman, Dominick and the cook were there but Fung Wang was not. Laurens noticed that the Chinaman's mount was missing with its owner. He went up to the busy cook who was bustling over a pack, Calla-

han and his foreman being some distance away. "Where's that chink?" he asked, and there was something in his voice which demanded the Mexican's attention. "I no see heem for long time, boss," he returned. "He taka hoss—he go thata way." He pointed toward the low sand swells to the north.

Laurens did not lose a second. Running back to his mule he flung saddle and bridle on it, and with the risk of following a lost scent, but hot with indignation, he drove into the semi-desert. The Chinaman had the ball and he had deserted from the party; Laurens knew it as surely as if the man had told him.

He would not have accomplished his end had it not been for the clear moonlight and the patches of barren sand. With them he was able to pick up the careless trail, but it was so long before he sighted the Chinaman that he was almost in a panic. At last he caught sight of the fat figure as horse and man crossed a hillock, and he instantly sent out a hail to halt. The surprised Oriental obeyed and a moment later Laurens reached his side. He began without preface.

"Fung Wang, you no like me—I no like you. You run off like one damn dog. I know why. You

want little ivory ball hid in bed you go way with. Now I want——”

From his years spent in China, Laurens had come to the conclusion that Chinamen of the obvious type of Fung Wang could only understand that variety of English known as “pidgin.” Though not versed in its intricacies, he believed that he could make the stolid Chinaman understand his meaning better if couched in simple words as nearly approaching pidgin English as possible. So he held out his hand with an unmistakable gesture.

“Give me!” he demanded.

The Chinaman sat still on his horse and looked at the young man silently for a few moments; then there passed over his face the same sort of spasm Laurens had noticed once before when talking to him.

“Mr. Laurens, if you will consent to speak in your native language I think we will get along better.” The words were in as clear and correct English as Laurens himself could have used; it was like hearing an animal suddenly talk.

For a moment the American felt foolish, but the next instant his anger flamed higher, though at the same time he felt a certain respect for the man.

“Then you are no common coolie!” he exclaimed.

"You are quite correct, sir. I received much of my education in your country."

"And you have been masquerading! Why?"

"My purposes are my own affair," was the answer, but there was nothing of the defiant in his attitude as he sat in his saddle. Laurens wondered if his confidence came from his being armed, but it made little difference to him.

"Let your purposes be what they may; you have the ball belonging to Miss Dalzell."

"Well, sir?"

"Have you not?"

"I refuse to answer."

"But had better not refuse to act. Get from your horse or I'll pull you from it." As he made the demand he drew his revolver.

The Chinaman at once obeyed and stood on the sand while Laurens dismounted and stepped near him. He was rather puzzled at the Oriental's quick compliance with orders. Had the fellow offered to draw a weapon he would have shot him like a snake.

"Now, you thief, I want the ball you took from this." With one hand Laurens held out the teak-wood box, the other being ready for any act of treachery. The apparently calm Chinaman made no return, only looking at him through his slits of

eyes. There was absolutely no emotion on the fat face, and the man's whole attitude was one of contemptuous insolence. Laurens slipped both box and revolver into his pocket and threw off his coat.

"You damned pagan, you cannot pretend to misunderstand me when I tell you that if you don't produce that ball in ten seconds I will take it from you."

Not a word was returned. The Chinaman simply stood there in the moonlight as unmoved and unmoving as though he were a fixture in the landscape. His continued silence brought the American's temper to a climax, and without warning he leaped for him and caught him with the force of a football tackle.

And then Laurens was astonished. The Chinaman did not even raise a hand when he was grappled and the athletic man threw him to the ground as easily as he had many a time upset a dummy on the gridiron, and the Oriental lay where he fell. And still without the least resistance he allowed Laurens to go through his clothing. There was no weapon but a closed clasp-knife, but the ball was found. It was wrapped in a piece of fine Chinese silk.

Once the thing was in his possession Laurens straightened himself and cursed the prostrate Celestial as few men are ever cursed, damning his ances-

tors along with him. "Get up," he finally commanded.

The other did not move.

"I don't know who you are," Laurens went on, tempted to kick him if only from disgust at his supineness, "but you are not what you seem—a servant. Your assumed position is a gigantic lie! Have you anything to say?"

The Chinaman looked up at him and spoke calmly: "Confucius says: 'He who lies on the ground cannot fall far.' You will remember, sir, that I have not raised my hand against you, even in self-defense. You have used violence."

"I am not likely to forget your mushiness! Will you tell me about this ball you stole?"

At the question something like animation came to the Chinaman. He raised himself to his elbow and pointed at Laurens. "I will tell you nothing, sir, at least at present, and never at your demand. I have submitted to force, but your God may pity you from this day forward. Confucius says: 'He who takes an ox must return a horse.' Go from me, Mr. Laurens. You think you have won, but remember another axiom of Confucius: 'A living gnat is more dangerous than a dead serpent.' "

It was a thinly veiled threat for the future. "You

had better see to it that, gnat as you are, you keep out of my way in future."

Even as he spoke Laurens wondered who this man was. Why did he tamely submit to being assaulted? He was certain that cowardice alone did not account for it. If the Chinaman had intended to let him have his way why had he not given up the ball and saved himself additional humiliation? They were questions he could not answer. But he had a final word for him.

"Fung Wang, or whoever you may be, from now on you will shift for yourself. I wish nothing further to do with you; and if you again approach the young lady who is under my care you will regret it more than you do that which has just happened. You understand me?"

There was no answer. Laurens remounted his mule and rode off some distance before looking back. Fung Wang was still on the ground, face down, his arms extended and his fingers clutching the loose sand—an attitude of deep despair.

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CHAPTER VII

IN THE DESERT

IT was still dark when camp was broken and the party again started. The moon had set and the air was bitterly cold. The girl seemed some better for her rest, but she did not appear greatly interested when Laurens told her of his adventure with Fung Wang. She was too weak to do much talking. "He has no fight in him," he said, in conclusion. "He is a mush of softness. I could have stabbed him with a feather without ruffling its beard! And yet——" He stopped as he thought of a certain dignity in the man as he lay on the sand and quoted from Confucius.

"I think you did well in ordering him to keep away," was about all the girl said in reply.

Laurens gave her the ball, and not wishing to be trammelled by the empty box, and not caring to throw it away, he tied it to the horn of the girl's saddle.

When the sun sprang up in a brazen sky they had advanced well into the desert proper, there now being nothing in sight but sand, cactus, greasewood, and a little sage and bunch-grass. They were well past the indefinite line where the inferno of scarcity merges into the veritable hades of the Flerro Desert, the sister of the great American waste north of the Rio Grande. There is an actual horror to the land, but it is a horror that is fascinating; and it holds a peculiar beauty of distance, of form, of color, which has lured many a curious victim into its capacious maw.

It is a tragic part of God's footstool. The few living things which spring from the earth take an early look at the world and cease growing, then put on thorns to meet the conditions of scarcity and save themselves from annihilation. Treachery is everywhere. It lurks under a sage brush in the shape of the venomous side-winder; it is in the white dust, the alkali of which sears like a hot iron. It is even in the sky. At night the heavens draw very near and the stars shine with a brightness peculiar to the region; it is like the smile of a lovely woman. But by day the terrible sun lashes the land; the sky changes its humor; it is no longer feminine in its softness; it is a fury.

The travelers found these conditions. When the sun rose the chill of the night was almost instantly dispelled and the heavens blasted them. Laurens had known heat in the tropics, but it was as nothing to that of the Flerro Desert; and his thirst was intolerable. He had looked for the Chinaman and failed to see him; but when broad day came and there was no sign of him the young man was worried a trifle, for he had not meant to drive him to perish alone in that horrible land. The girl showed little interest in anything, and before half the morning had passed she looked as if she might faint and fall from her horse at any moment. Laurens watched her carefully, giving her quantities of water, and undoubtedly his attention saved her from complete collapse that day. He dreaded to think of the day to follow.

At sunset they came upon a water-hole, but it was as dry as a sun-baked stirrup-leather. Even Callahan looked blank and Laurens was fairly frightened; his store of water was two-thirds gone and it would be two more days to Fort Hancock. He feared for the girl; he feared for himself, and began to feel sure that his charge would never get to the Rio Grande, even if the already dragging animals did not give out. He hunted up the Irish-

man to ask him about the next water-hole and found him standing over the clean bones of a human skeleton lying a few hundred feet from where they had camped for the night.

It was an uncanny sight, under the conditions. In the center of the forehead of the bleached skull was a hole the size of the young man's thumb and he knew it had been made by a bullet.

"Apache work?" he asked, speaking to the Irishman for the first time that day. Callahan turned his bleary red eyes on him and Laurens saw he had been drinking.

"Not on yer life!" was the growling return. "Injuns don't work that way, an' they's been no Apache outrage fer two year! Ye can see that the slats o' this felly lie on top o' the ground, so 'tis not long since he croaked."

"Was it murder?"

"Divil a bit o' murder! He was plugged t'rough the brain by some wan who wanted to do him a favor. Likely he was dyin' o' thirst or fever, an' his party couldn't wait, seein' the water-hole was dry. 'Twould have finished thim all if they had to play nurse to a helpless man."

"And they killed him rather than desert him alive?"

"Shure!" said Callahan. "An' I wud do the same fer ye—or anywan. There'll be no waitin' fer thim that goes down; let me tell ye that.

"Hav' a dhrink." He held out a flask of whisky.

"No," said the young man, recoiling. "Where is the next water-hole?"

"God knows—I don't," was the ready return. "We've a chanct to come to wan; that's all I can say." He laughed and put the flask to his lips.

In utter dejection Laurens went back to camp. Within an hour Callahan was drunk, and Dominick and the cook went to sleep in fine disregard of the conditions. After seeing that the girl was well wrapped up, Laurens flung himself on the ground and followed suit.

They were up early next morning and greatly to the young man's relief the young woman looked some better, though she was but the shadow of herself. Not a word of complaint did she utter, but it was clear that her vitality was low. After a few mouthfuls of food Laurens hustled to start and on going to the water-skin to lash it on the pack-horse he made a discovery that nearly bowled him over.

For the water-bag was gone. He had filled the girl's individual bottle, and his own, the night before, and had given a little to the animals, then

placed it on top of the pack. But it was no longer there. He thought that perhaps the Mexicans had stolen his supply and he quietly searched the camp for it, but could not even find the empty skin. He was panic-stricken, but said nothing to Callahan, who glowered at everything as he sat on the sand, his red eyes like fire. It would be useless to face the explosion which would come if he accused anyone of the theft of his water supply. "Where's that domned chink?" asked the Irishman, roaring out the question.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him since night before last," returned Laurens, his heat turning to ice as a glimmer of the truth came to him.

"The divil fly off wid him, wherever he is!" laughed Callahan. The young man turned away. He knew that practically the same indifference would be shown if he told the Irishman of his loss. He went back to the girl, sick at heart, but he dared not tell her. Tragedy seemed to lay close ahead.

And into it they drove. There was nothing else to do, and all that day was like a horrible dream to Laurens. The night had brought its usual cold, but by noon the heat was at least 130 degrees and the excessively dry, hot air sapped all moisture. The young man was half crazed by thirst, but he had

sense enough to cherish the last of the nauseous fluid in his bottle though he was beset by an overwhelming desire to drink it all at once. His only hope was to come upon a water-hole. To stop now meant death.

No one spoke without necessity. Lips were cracked and tongues were like dry bones. Miss Dalzell sat on her drooping horse like a corpse lashed to the saddle, her eyes without expression, her face like stone. The first animal to fall was Laurens' pack-horse. It went down with a groan and was soon followed by one of Callahan's, but on they went without attempting to shift the burdens, leaving the beasts to the vultures.

But for all the young man's misery he was not entirely dead to the sinister beauty of the terrible land. The distances were glowing with purples and delicate crimsons, and the mirage shifted its alluring pictures on the screen of the quivering, superheated air; but it did not deceive him. They were now strung out far apart, Laurens and the girl half a mile in the rear of the others and often losing sight of them. The great Spanish mule, a giant of an animal, showed signs of distress, while the girl's mount stumbled along with its head hanging low.

Even in the dimness of his brain Laurens knew it must soon give out—and then what?

He was too far gone thoroughly to realize conditions; nothing lay heavily on his numbed mind and much of his suffering was already sub-conscious. But his objective agony was keen enough; he cursed the blinding, sweltering, blasting sun, and at times was cursed in turn by visions of coolness—watermelons with beads of moisture standing out on them, the pink pulp dripping lusciously. He saw bunches of wet water-cress, and again, blocks of clear ice lay on the sand in front of him. He knew they were delusions and that he was failing mentally. He would have given all his wealth to have wallowed in the filthy, March slush of a New York gutter. He saw himself doing it.

The man was dreaming, but never in his dreams was it borne to him that not a great way behind, and sometimes momentarily in sight as he came over a swell of sand, was the Chinaman, imperturbable and calm-faced, sitting on his horse whose nostrils he frequently wet from the supply of water held in the two bags lashed to his saddle. His eyes were almost always fixed on the specks of humanity he sometimes saw in the distance, and if one could have

read those eyes they would have seen in them tenacity of purpose.

The end came suddenly enough. It was late in the afternoon and the girl had, without knowing it, drawn near to Laurens. The party ahead had long been out of sight. For some reason the man awoke to the fact that there had come a change in the sky though not in the heat; he realized in a dull way that there was a sign of coming relief, but he was too far gone even to thank God for it. He dimly knew the meaning of the low, blue-black bank of clouds which had lifted above the northern horizon, its top as straight and level as though ruled. At first he had thought it a *mesa*, blue in the distance, but a few minutes later he recognized it for what it was—a coming storm—a “norther”—one of the violent tempests peculiar to those latitudes and which turns the tropics to the arctics, in an hour perhaps. He knew it would bring wind and possibly hail and rain on the following day, but would he live that long? He existed in the present only; to him there was no future. He had forgotten the things of the day before; he had forgotten the Chinaman, the ivory ball, the fight with the insurrectos. The dull tragedy of the hour obliterated all else.

The sky was like a demon as it smote him. His

mule stumbled. He vaguely remembered getting off and walking by its side to ease the animal to lose which meant the end of all, and he had come upon an outcropping of living rock jutting from the bottom of a swale. His poor beast made a piteous noise in his throat, and at that instant Laurens heard the sound of running water. It was no freak of his brain; it was the noise of gushing, bubbling water, and it was flowing rapidly as if over a rocky bed.

He stopped and looked around, locating the source of the wonderful music in an instant. A cleft not two fingers wide lay at his feet and from the opening came the subdued roar of a fast running stream. Such anomalous conditions are not infrequent in the desert; the land above may be aflame but under its surface may run a sluice of water and give no sign.

Laurens tried to shout but his baked tongue and dry throat did not permit a sound. He dropped on his knees and laid his ear to the cleft and then knew that the water was far beyond his reach; it was a sunken river from twenty to fifty feet below and there was no way of getting at it. He had been more than half crazed before, but now the suggestive sound made further endurance impossible. No mor-

phine fiend ever reached for his drug with half the fervor he reached for his water-bottle, willing to sacrifice the future to the present. In a frenzy of haste he tore out the cork and the violence of the act jerked the flask from his hand. He saw it whirl from him and strike the rock on which he stood; he heard the splintering of glass, and the next moment he was stupidly looking at the fragments of the bottle and the damp spot where the trickle of water had almost instantly disappeared.

Then he went to pieces. He tried to give one mighty yell, and tearing off his cap flung it far from him, the first clear sign of a desert-locoed brain, and then he became aware that he was clutching a bottle and swallowing great gulps of a warm, slimy fluid which tasted like nectar.

When a man is demented by desert thirst, water is a quick remedy, even moistening the tongue turning him from madness to sanity almost instantly. So the slimy water he had taken acted like magic on Laurens. He came to himself and saw the girl standing by his side.

And then he knew. He stared at her and at the empty bottle in her hand, but he did not even thank her. Her beauty was gone, her eyes sunken, her cheeks fallen in, her lips swollen, cracked and dark.

She tried to speak to him but only a clacking noise came from her throat, and as Laurens looked at her she slowly reeled sidewise and fell on the sand by the edge of the rock.

CHAPTER VII

A CLIMAX

AT her fall Laurens became keenly alive. He bent over her but she was entirely unconscious. He chafed her hands; he called her by name, but by every outward sign he believed her to be dying, for her breath was feeble and the slow rise and fall of her bosom almost imperceptible. He looked around in despair. Nothing was in sight but the swells of the desert and the two animals, each with its muzzle close to the cleft in the rock. Like one beset he mounted the mule and raced after those ahead. The water had revived him and for the moment he felt all his old strength.

He now knew what the girl had sacrificed for him. His own selfishness seemed colossal and the fact that what he had done was done unconsciously did not relieve his sense of shame.

In less than a mile he overtook Callahan and the two Mexicans. The Irishman, far gone himself, was in no aggressive mood, and when Laurens told

him that the boy was down Callahan only nodded and crossed himself. "God help us all!" he muttered thickly.

"But a little water may save him!" exclaimed Laurens, on fire with hurry. "Let me have it, or, by heaven! I'll take it if I die for it!"

The Irishman drew in his horse and looked at him with something like despair in his eyes. "Wather, is ut! God knows ye might have it, were there a drop. Wan skin was used an' is as dry as me tongue, an' the other—well, sor, this marnin' 'twas found wid a thorn hole in the bottom an' is as empty as the head av the man we saw lyin' in his bones. Where's your own wather?"

Laurens told him of the unexplained loss. Callahan looked at him blankly for a moment then brought his great hand down on his thigh with a blow like a pistol shot. "'Twas that domned chink!" he exclaimed. "'Twas Fung Wang! He hates me as he hates ye. He stole yer bag in the night, an' by the same token it could have been no thorn that emptied mine!"

The information was no great surprise to Laurens, but his heart went to his boots. "And the boy? What——"

"There is but wan thing I can do for the lad,"

interrupted Callahan. "Stay here." And with that he drove his horse to where Dominick and the cook had halted. Laurens saw him beckon to the foreman and speak a few words in a low voice. The man nodded, and turning his horse rode back in the direction from which the young man had come. Callahan returned. "Where is Dominick going?" asked Laurens.

"Ye had better stop here an' ask no questions," was the reply, and then the anxious man knew.

"Do you mean that you have sent him back to murder the boy?" he demanded, his blood suddenly surging.

"Ye've an ugly name fer a favor," was the answer. "D'ye mind the slats o' the felly by the dry wather-hole? The only chanct ye hov to reach the Rio is to kape movin'! Do ye look to me to lay by an' nur-r-se the lad? He's past nur-r-sin', me frind! Dominick is the only doctor fer him!"

If he said more Laurens did not hear him. His answer was an oath flung at the Irishman as he dug his heels into the ribs of the mule and urged him after the Mexican who had already disappeared. When he gained sight of him Dominick had reached the rock and dismounted and Laurens saw the sun flash from the barrel of the revolver he carried in

his hand. A minute more and he would have been too late, but he raised his voice in a last despairing shout which seemed to have no power—like one's shout in a dream—but it carried. Dominick looked up and saw him coming but continued his walk toward the prostrate body. He was standing looking down on it when Laurens threw himself from his mule and reached his side. "Heem almos' gone," said the Mexican. "Why you come back?"

"Were you going to kill?" demanded Laurens, stepping between him and the girl. The man shrugged his shoulders. "Eet is the signor's orders, my fren," he returned in a low, musical voice. "Turn away, signor. Eet will soon be of the past." He cocked his revolver and made as if to step around the young man but he was pushed aside. Laurens thrust his white face into the dark one of the other. "If you attempt to shoot that boy I'll put a bullet into you! Sabe?"

"The signor—he object?" replied the Mexican, opening his black eyes as if in wonder. "But, my orders, signor!"

"Damn your orders! It is my order that you get back to your master at once—or stay here forever." As he spoke Laurens drew his revolver.

The Mexican understood the threat even if he failed to follow the words. With a feeble smile and another indifferent raising of the shoulders he walked to his horse, mounted it and rode away without looking around. It was the last that Laurens ever saw of him, Callahan, or the cook.

He turned his attention to the girl. She was still alive and he thought her partially conscious, but she was unable to speak or even move her lips. In the hope that she understood him he poured out words which he never would have dared to utter had the conditions been different. He believed she was dying, and beyond this short outpouring of his soul he could do nothing but wait for the end. And then? He did not trouble himself about the future; that appeared plain enough.

John Laurens was not the kind of man to indulge in heroic moods. His motives, as they concerned Josephine Dalzell, had scarcely been influenced by his promise to the girl's uncle not to desert her. From first to last he had acted from pure impulse—the impulse that arises at the call of sex to sex; or perhaps it was the finger of Fate which had guided him. But he knew that if he had allowed the Mexican to free the girl of her suffering and relieve him of his self-undertaken responsibility he would have

had murder on his soul. It would have been the same as if he had gone on with Callahan, leaving her to die alone.

He sat by the girl's side with his bare head in his hands until the sun went down, only once looking up and noticing that the bank of clouds had grown perceptibly higher. Night fell, and it falls suddenly in that region. The full moon rose, and then came the chill—a chill that struck to his marrow. It aroused him to a sense of his situation, and it probably revived the girl, for as he got to his feet he saw her eyes were open. Once she moved, shifting her body slightly as if uneasy, but she could not speak. Laurens took off his coat and spread it over her, the blankets being miles behind on the dead pack-horse, then he walked up and down to keep his blood moving. His thirst was again intense, but he tried not to think of it.

The moon was glorious, the sky tender, the brilliant stars swung low. In the north the black pall crept slowly aloft, so slowly that from hour to hour the man could not mark their lift. There was no wind and the stillness was more like a thing than a condition; it was a relief to hear the crunch of sand under foot and the movements of the animals still nosing the rock-cleft.

Laurens must have walked miles in the night, and that within a space of three hundred feet, always watching the clouds and wondering when the storm, his only hope, would break. It was toward morning and he was just turning at the end of his beat when he was astonished to see the girl sit up. He ran toward her, but before he could reach her she fell back and became as rigid as the rock near which she lay.

Laurens went to his knees beside her, but the sudden hope he had entertained was at once obliterated when he looked closely into her face. To him it was plain that her attempt to rise had been the final and spasmodic effort of nature. She was dead—dead by every test he could make. Not a breath came from her swollen mouth, not a heartbeat or pulse flutter could he discover, and her wide-open eyes were like glass in the moonlight.

He was free at last—free to take up Callahan's trail and follow him—free to follow her—free to do anything. Save for the girl's body and the two animals he was alone in the hellish desert.

For a time he looked stupidly at the figure before him, then did what he had not dared do before. He bent and kissed her white forehead, and then he

knew—and fully knew—why he had been stanch and considerate.

Laurens' manhood had been sorely tried and the last of it seemed to desert him. He dropped on the sand beside the still body and his own shook under dry sobs, for there was no moisture for tears. He was like a stricken child, but he was no longer frightened, his mental and physical misery being too abject for fright. Finally he drifted into forgetfulness or imbecility, and when he again came to have a partial sense of things it was because the risen sun was blasting his bare head.

He looked around like one awakened by a blow. The clouds had risen until they reached to near the zenith, a vast slate colored curtain which would soon eclipse the sun. Far to the south a few specks drifted across the still glaring blue, growing larger. Laurens knew what they were. The vultures were gathering.

Nothing else had changed. The girl still lay near him, her eyes wide, staring at the sky. They troubled him. He got from his coat the handkerchief he had found, and which he now knew had been hers, and spread it over the upturned face, doing it reverently. After that he took out his card, wrote on it her name and the date of her death and placed it

between her stiff fingers. It might be found some day, but at present it was her only gravestone. At least he thought he wrote the meager record of her death, but none could have made out the scrawling, meaningless characters. He had done all he could and he felt that he ought to leave, even then recognizing that he owed a duty to himself.

He went toward the animals. The girl's horse was already down, having died in the night, the teakwood box still dangling from the saddle-horn where he had tied it. As for the ball, he was as far from thinking of it as an insane man could be.

He staggered toward his mule, then suddenly stopped in wonder. For the great animal had lost its head. It seemed very funny to Laurens and he laughed aloud, but it was the cackling laugh of an idiot. He sat on the ground and began tossing sand into the air, like a child at play. Finally he saw the Chinaman appear from behind a swell. As he came on silently with long strides he grew taller and taller until his head reached the sun and darkened it. And then Laurens got to his knees, grovelled before him and prayed that he end his suffering. Suddenly he lurched forward and lay still.

For moments deathly silence reigned there in the burning desert, with no slightest move from either

of the stark, staring figures lying on the sand. Then from over a hummock there appeared the head and then the full figure of Fung Wang as he drew himself up to full length from the crouching position of waiting he had assumed and cautiously surveyed the scene before him. His slippered feet slid over the space between him and the body of Laurens and he stood looking down on it, in his slits of eyes a light of triumph and vindication. He did not bend over the body to see if there was one remaining spark of life. Instead, he suddenly spurned it with his foot and muttered:

“Dog! Dog of a Christian! May you find your Christian hell!”

Then he turned his attention to the girl. But there was a different light in the eyes as he bent over her, every faculty alert to see if life still remained. There was even much of tenderness in his manner, a manner that would have turned Laurens to a fury could he have seen it—tenderness and an air of proprietorship, as though he had been waiting for this time. He unslung his water bottle and poured some of the nauseous fluid between her set lips. Then he patiently bathed her face, chafed her hands and again and again moistened the baked lips. But the girl did not stir; she gave no sign of

life. It seemed that the ministrations of the Chinese had come too late to be of any aid to her.

Still Fung Wang persisted in his attempts to revive Josephine Dalzell. A slight sigh and a fluttering of the white eyelids at last told him he was being rewarded.

As suddenly as she had fallen into her state of coma, the girl, under the life-giving influence of the healing water, came back to life. She struggled to sit up and looked dazedly at the Chinaman who bent over her, all expression that he may have had a personal interest in keeping her alive now gone from his face.

"Fung Wang!" she cried. "You here? What——"

Stolid as ever the Chinaman's tones held their usual note of subservience.

"All light, now, Missy," he said, and his manner was soothing and consoling. "All light. 'Melican go daid, Fung Wang he come, give water, save Missy."

Something like a sob came from the throat of Josephine Dalzell as she listened to her servant's explanation. Her feelings underwent a rapid change. How she had misjudged this faithful man! Only a few hours it had been since she had virtually

accused him to Laurens of deliberately wanting to have her murdered—and now he had saved her life! There was real gratitude in her eyes as she glanced up at Fung Wang.

“Thank God, you came in time, Fung Wang!” she murmured fervently. “I thought I was dying—was dead, perhaps. If we ever reach safety, and there is ever any thing I can do for you——”

The Chinaman’s head was turned away from the girl, and she could not see the look of vile animal passion that crossed his ugly face as she spoke. When he again turned toward her, his countenance was as bland and uncompromising as ever.

“You better?” he asked, aiding the girl to sit up. “We go now.”

“But—but Mr. Laurens!” She looked about her wildly and the horror came back as she saw the pitiful figure lying nearby on the sand.

“Missy not look,” was the Chinaman’s reply. “Laurens, he go daid. We no can do good.”

In a flash it all swept over the girl what Laurens had done for her. She remembered his self-sacrifice, his patient attentions, his determination never to desert her. In that same flash it was brought to her what the man had really meant to her, and her cup of bitterness was full. He had meant so

much—could have meant so much more! And now he was dead! She wondered if there could be any slightest hope. She struggled to her knees and then to her feet, and tottered over toward the man, but the Chinaman gently pushed her aside as he knelt beside the body of Laurens, lifted up his eyelids, shook his head after he had felt the pulse and murmured regretfully:

“No can do.”

Fung Wang pointed out the gathering clouds to the girl, and the fact that it was growing late in the day. They must go on. They could do no good by remaining here with a dead man. With all the sorrow of the world in her eyes dimmed with tears, Josephine Dalzell realized that her servant was right. She could serve no purpose to the dead by remaining here to die in the desert beside him. Tenderly she lifted the coat, his coat which he had put over her, and laid it gently across the man's body. At least she could not leave him uncovered here in the desert. Her tears came freely in spite of the lack of moisture in her racked body as she tottered above him. Then she closed them as she muttered a prayer for this friend she had known so short a time, still had known so long. As she opened them, the man's mute dead face looked up at her. It

seemed to be pleading. She turned away, but the face still haunted her. At least she could do as much for him as he had done for her when he must have thought her dead. She took the little handkerchief with her initial on it and gently laid it across his face.

In a dream she seemed to be hearing Fung Wang urging her to hurry. She tottered and would have fallen as he led her toward the horses had it not been for his supporting arm. He had bodily to lift the girl into the saddle of one of his horses, and there she sat unsteadily, clinging to the pommel, while Fung Wang looked about finally as though not to overlook anything. Suddenly his eyes caught sight of the box tied to the saddle of Josephine's dead pack animal. With an air of gloating that the girl was too overcome to note or to care about if she had, he quickly unfastened the box and tied it to his own saddle. He mounted and they prepared to start, but Fung Wang saw that Josephine could not go on without aid. He rode his horse as near hers as possible and with one arm he held her up in her saddle, as the patient, nearly done animals once more plodded on their weary way across the desert.

A hundred yards further on, the girl with an effort painfully turned her head and glanced back at the

figure on the sands, as her dry lips once more murmured a prayer. It was her good-bye.

Then she faced the horizon far in front of her and Fung Wang, and they two rode on out toward it—toward the country of the Rio Grande, and safety.

Though he had for hours lain in a state of coma that was an exact counterfeit of death—a condition that it would have taken the expert and minute examination of a physician to prove not death, John Laurens had not passed over the line. Hours went by as he lay there.

An adventuresome vulture swooped down and its wings brushed the handkerchief across the man's face. Some uncanny instinct of the foul bird told it its time was not yet and it settled down on a sand hummock to its death watch. It could not be long.

The clouds that had been gathering, banked themselves and hid the sun. Their blackness was ominous. The watching ghoul bird cocked a speculative eye at their piled up murkiness, fluttered a wing and mounted, slowly, regretfully. It knew that the time had come for it to seek shelter.

Then the "norther" broke—broke in all the fury that the elements seemed to have reserved for

that particular corner of the world. Rain, healing, reviving rain poured down on the sun-baked desert; it drenched the stiff, stark figure of the man whose parched, distorted lips were hidden by a filmy bit of linen. He stirred after a time. And then he came back—slowly back from the edge of the dark valley where his spirit had been hovering.

When he came to himself he realized he was lying on the sand and his clothes were soaked with blessed water; he was shaking with the cold of it and something was sticking to his face, blinding him. He sat up and pulled the thing off, perfectly sane for the moment, and he at once recognized it as the handkerchief he had laid over the eyes of the dead girl. A curtain of rain and hail was being driven on a strong wind and his clothing was stiffened with ice. With difficulty he got to his feet and looked around. His mule was no longer in sight, but the carcass of Josephine's horse lay where it had fallen, now glazed with the sleet of the "norther" which had saved the man's life. Was it all a dream? He walked to where he had left the dead girl and then dug his fingers into his eyes.

For her body was gone!

He tried to pull his poor wits together with the result of concluding that she must have been trans-

lated, for there was no track, not a footprint, leading from the spot. It did not occur to him that the driving rain might have obliterated every sign of her going. The coat he had thrown over her lay water-soaked where he had lain it. That was all he saw. The next moment he was again prone on the wet sand.

CHAPTER IX

THE RESCUE

C OMPANY F, of the ——th United States Cavalry, was returning to Fort Hancock after a raid on the Villistas who had profaned United States territory in a sortie across the Rio Grande. They had been practically successful and was going back in the teeth of one of the most severe “northers” any of the band had ever experienced. The wind was a biting hurricane, the rain froze as it fell, and gusts of hail caused every head to bend. Behind the company struggled an ambulance drawn by four mules and beneath its sleet-covered canvas were two men who had been slightly wounded. Ahead rode a squad under Lieutenant Finch.

Despite the storm the lieutenant was wide-eyed and curious, for it was his first season at a southern post, and he was the first to catch sight of two black spots on the sand near a ridge of rock jutting from the bottom of a swale. He sent a corporal to investigate and received the report that there was a dead

horse and a live man in the swale; that the man was clean crazy and was sitting on the rock counting his half-frozen fingers and laughing.

Laurens had been found, but he did not know it. When the main body came up he was lifted into the ambulance and the surgeon worked over him with stimulants until he dropped into a deep sleep. A search was made of the vicinity but nothing was found but a water-soaked card on which was the name of "John Laurens," and a jumble of letters written on its back, and a coat. A cap was found some distance from the rock. The cavalcade went on.

In the hospital at Fort Hancock Laurens raved for two weeks under as severe an attack of brain fever as the surgeon had ever known, and when at last the disease was overcome the young man was but a wreck of himself. Weeks more passed before he would talk, and then all they could get from him was the simple story of how he, with a young lady, an Irishman and two Mexicans, had fled from the insurrectos and attempted to cross the desert. He said that the three last had deserted him and the girl, who had died, but he made no mention of where she had died, so that his rescuers had no reason to wonder that they had not discovered her body. His

benumbed brain had not sufficiently reacted to remember anything of the Chinaman and the ivory ball.

As a former United States officer he was given the best of care, and when at length he had grown stronger and some two months had passed, the post surgeon came to him with a bundle.

"Of course we went through your few effects, Lieutenant," he said. "Here are your wallet with several hundred dollars in it, a silver match-box, and a woman's handkerchief which you had stuffed into your shirt. And there is an ivory ball wrapped in Chinese silk. It is the most wonderful bit of Oriental carving I have ever seen, and the diamond in the dragon's head must be worth considerable."

Laurens started. "My God! Where did you find that?"

"In a side pocket of your coat. You had thrown it off, along with your cap, when you went locoed."

"In my coat?"

"Yes. Would you mind telling me where you got such a superb bit of *virtu*?"

"Thanks for returning it," said Laurens, wearily. "I thought it lost, if I thought at all. I will tell you about it some time."

But he never did.

Laurens' brain had suddenly cleared. He now remembered everything, but he could not understand how the ball could have been found in his coat. It was more than strange. He perfectly recollected that the last time he had seen it was when he gave it to Josephine, after taking it from Fung Wang. How had it come to be in his pocket? How came her handkerchief over his face? What had become of the poor girl's body? He worked himself into a fever trying to clear the three mysteries, but with no other result.

He finally tried to cease thinking of it; and the curiosity of the surgeon was never satisfied, for almost at once after returning Laurens' belongings he was ordered to another post.

CHAPTER X

IN SAN FRANCISCO

A YEAR passed—a whole year, and one that marked little or nothing in Laurens' life. He had recovered his health and strength, but his experience had left its mark; his natural lightheartedness was a thing of the days gone by. He was quiet, self-possessed, undemonstrative, and had lost his passion for foreign travel. He sought no close companions though he soon joined the exclusive circle of the Wanderers Club of San Francisco, in which he was well received both for his wealth and his social position, though he was hardly popular because of a certain aloofness in his character.

He was not a man to be passed unnoticed; there was an air of quiet dignity about him which was made more effective by his fine figure and finer face. All his club-mates and acquaintances agreed that John Laurens must have had an interesting history,

if he would tell it, but none ventured on questioning him; he did not appear to be the kind of man who would either welcome or satisfy curiosity regarding himself.

He had no particular object in life and was bored as only one with wealth but without a definite ambition can be bored, but he plunged into no dissipation to offset the monotony of his days. Once in a while he dipped or was forced into some social function, but he had no taste for gay society, though he became fairly well acquainted in the "set" which struck the fashionable pace, and by it he was looked upon as a desirable but rather hopeless *parti*.

He had elegant apartments and lived at ease on the product of the past labors of his uncle, who had been a hard man riding rough-shod over his fellows without considering their rights. His nephew and heir had little love for his memory.

From the day he left Fort Hancock, Laurens recognized that as a man of honor he had one duty to perform, and that, to do justice to the heirs of Josephine Dalzell and place in their possession the curio he held and which might, or might not, be a valuable asset. As for looking at it in the light of treasure-trove and keeping it for either its worth or association, the idea never entered his head.

But the more he thought about its history, as he knew it, and the more he examined the wonderful piece of work, the more he was persuaded that it possessed a value far greater than was represented by the diamond in its end or the marvelous delicacy of its carving. That the beautiful but harmless looking bit of art might be a curséd thing did not seriously occur to him, though he recognized it as seeming to have had a malign influence on its former possessors. He recollected that the soldier, who had sold it for a song to Colonel Dalzell, was killed; that the colonel himself was dead; that his half brother, Stillwell, who had held it, was dead, and that the girl was dead, as was probably the Chinaman who had stolen it from her. Before leaving Fort Hancock, Laurens had pushed inquiries for Fung Wang, but could learn nothing whatever, and his conclusion was that of those who had handled the ball he alone was alive.

He had twice been to New York on his errand of discovering the Dalzell heirs. He had also been to the War Office in Washington, but all he could learn was that Colonel Dalzell had been retired from the army more than ten years before; that he had been a widower, that he had one child, a daughter, Josephine, and that his next nearest rela-

tive was a half-brother, James Stillwell, present residence unknown. Further efforts to discover a Dalzell heir or a Stillwell connection ran up against a blind wall.

Still, he did not entirely abandon the search. He placed the matter of tracing the family into the hands of a reliable lawyer in New York and returned to San Francisco, where he set about finding something of the worth of the ball itself.

The leading jewelry house of that city employs a well known expert in precious stones and articles of *virtu*, and to him Laurens went. He showed the ball to Mr. Drouski and asked him his opinion of its value. The expert looked astonished as he saw the thing, but in a short time it became apparent that he knew little more of it than did Laurens. He examined it carefully under a glass.

"We haven't the slightest notion what this egg can be," he finally said, speaking as if he were an editor. "It is an extraordinary piece of work, sir, but we cannot even say to what epoch it belongs. That it is ancient—very ancient—we believe; the cut of the stone shows us that; we have never seen its exact like." He took the glass from his eye. "Do you wish to sell?"

"No," said Laurens.

"We might offer a thousand dollars and take a chance, sir."

"I do not care to sell. I am here for your opinion only."

"Perhaps we might offer more if we were allowed to remove the stone and weigh it. Will you reconsider?"

"No," returned Laurens. "The *ojimi* is not mine. Moreover, I doubt if the diamond could be removed without injuring the tracery around it."

"I have the same doubt myself," returned Mr. Drouski.

Laurens' efforts ended here, for the time. He had a new box made for the ball, placed it in a safe-deposit vault, and thought little of it as the days, weeks and months went by.

It was a September afternoon when the tide of his aimless existence took a turn he was far from expecting. He was walking from his apartments toward his Club when a passing limousine drew up ahead of him, and a small, gloved hand shaken from the window attracted his attention. He looked closely and recognized the lady behind it. She was the young wife of a club companion, the man with whom he had been the most intimate, if that word can express their mutual liking. Laurens

had several times accepted the hospitality of his home, and, bachelor-like, had envied him in his happiness. A dazzling smile welcomed him as, with hat in hand, he went to the side of the limousine.

"Mr. Laurens, it is an age since you called on us! And you are just the man I wish to see! Where have you been?"

"Only up the coast for a few days," he answered. "What is it that I can do for Mrs. Merrifield?"

"Oh, any number of things!" returned the vivacious lady. "But chiefly—one. Jack has gone fishing and won't be back for two weeks, and I want an escort. Excepting yourself the desirables are out of town!"

"Is it possible that the queen of society is reduced to——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted the lady. "Be serious. I have been invited to a reception at the Somersets and am deserted and disconsolate. You know the Somersets?"

"Yes. I have received an invitation, but had not thought of accepting. I forget the date. And you wish me to escort you? Beside yourself, what will be the attraction?"

"Probably none for you, you iceberg!" was the return. "But I wish very much to go. It is the

Somerset's first blaze for the season, and I believe there are several buds to be blown into blossoms and laid on the social altar. Will you sacrifice yourself for me?"

"You call it a sacrifice! Nothing can give me greater pleasure. And when does this felicity eventuate?"

"To-morrow night. I know it is short notice. Everyone is aware that Jack is away and they know what friends we are, so we won't be scandalized. Don't look so serious, Mr. Laurens! I know how you detest society! Are you afraid of meeting your fate at the Somersets?"

Laurens smiled. "Fate doesn't usually linger around to be found, does it? However, I will meet it bravely, when it attacks me."

"I don't believe you, sir. You would submit as tamely as Jack did. But I thank you for your rescue. I will send the limousine to-morrow at nine. Won't you ride? No? Well, good-bye."

Laurens felt himself booked for an evening of social formality, but he had not cared to refuse doing a favor to one who had so many times been his hostess. As he walked on to his destination it was with no anticipation of pleasure in the coming function,

though he was aware that the Somersets never did anything by halves. Few beside himself would have been willing to miss the brilliant entertainment which made no appeal to him.

CHAPTER XI

THE RECEPTION

THE Somerset mansion on Nob Hill was a blaze of lights when Laurens, with the radiant little Mrs. Merrifield on his arm, went up its broad steps. The great balloon-like dome of the conservatory attached to the house glowed with the iridescence of a soap-bubble and strings of colored Chinese lanterns swayed from the trees on the extensive grounds. It was a gay scene, but its gaiety had little effect on the man. There was no novelty about it to him; he had often seen its like.

He went through the proper formalities in the proper way. He met the people he knew he would meet. He danced with many women and with a grace and ease which few possess, and worked his way through the brilliant crush, a part of it, but not partaking of its spirit; he would have infinitely preferred a pipe and a good book in his own rooms. The hours dragged to him. The music, the scent of flowers, the humming of many voices, and the gay

laughter, never for a moment quickened his pulse. The aimless chatter of his last partner had bored him, and when he finally disposed of her to a callow youth who wished her for a fox-trot he stood aside and watched Mrs. Merrifield as she floated through the dance as happy as a young girl. Then he turned and made his way out of the crowd and into the large conservatory, thanking fortune that the evening was almost gone.

The place was deserted so far as he could see through the mass of palms and tropical growths which made it a beautiful jungle. He walked down the marble-floored center aisle, past a fountain over which a bronze nymph reigned, and at the end of a side passage came to a glass door opening into the illuminated grounds. Close by was a cluster of colored electric lights cleverly entwined among the boughs of a blossoming orange tree.

The odor of the flowers was oppressively strong. Laurens determined to go outside for a smoke and a breath of fresh air. He took out a cigar and as he saw the lanterns tossing in the strong night wind, to save his light he struck his match and held it to the end of the havana.

At that moment the door opened and a young lady came in from the grounds. She was alone and

the two met face to face. But this was no casual meeting in which there was a bow, a smile, and a way made for her to pass. Instead, the girl stopped short, and man and woman stared as if each were seeing a ghost. The flame of the match had eaten its way to Laurens' fingers before the pain of the burn brought him to his senses.

"Almighty God!" he exclaimed, forgetting the proprieties. "Are you Josephine Dalzell, or—or her spirit?"

The girl stepped away as if she were frightened at hearing his voice, but her distended eyes did not leave his as with one hand she groped for the back of a rustic seat by the door. Her face was as white as when he had last seen it as dead in the desert, and her large, dark eyes had the same stare.

"John—John Laurens!" she almost whispered, and sank to the bench in time to save herself from falling to the floor.

Laurens unsprung himself and with his heart racing was at her side in an instant. "It is you! You have come back! How are you here? What is the meaning of it? I—I thought you dead!" He was a trifle incoherent, but his surprise seemed to steady the young lady.

"You! I thought you—— I *saw* you dead!" she

returned, with a look of incredulity in her eyes and a slight drawing away of her slender figure as if she were still doubtful of the man as being flesh and blood. He noticed the shrinking and the emotion betrayed by her white face. He laid his hand on hers.

"It is a miracle! God works in a mysterious way!" he said softly. "We are both alive, each having thought the other dead! I was saved by the storm—and rescued by a squad of United States cavalry. And you?"

The touch of his hand reassured the girl. "Oh, the wonder of it! I was found—by Fung Wang."

"Fung Wang?"

She nodded, then as her nerves gave out she put her hands to her face and sobbed. It was the one thing needed to restore her balance and Laurens allowed her to cry without interruption. His own nerves needed steadying. Presently she quieted. "It is like waking from an awful dream!" she said.

"Thank God, this is no dream!" returned Laurens. "Can you tell me just what happened?"

"I am not likely ever to forget it," she answered. "I think there were but a few minutes of that fearful time in which I was thoroughly unconscious. I must have been for a little when I thought you were

going crazy and I gave you my water-bottle. There is a blank there."

"And you sacrificed yourself? You would not desert me?"

"Did you desert me?"

"But I am a man, and——"

"And I am a woman," she returned.

"Go on, please."

She looked straight into his eyes as she continued: "I came to myself when you and the Mexican arrived, but I was too far gone to resist him. I know you drove him away; I knew you thought I was dying; I knew you spread your coat over me; I heard you talking to me, but I could make no sign."

"You heard!" Laurens caught his breath as he remembered what he had said.

"Yes. Later I knew you were walking up and down. I wondered how long I would live. I wondered what you would do when I died. My mind was active but I could not stir a finger. Bye and bye I became conscious that something was galling my side, and the pain grew to be intolerable. I thought it out and was sure it was caused by the ivory ball I had put in my blouse when you gave it to me. It had worked around and I was lying on it. It must have been the pain that brought back the last of my

force. Suddenly I found I could move. I sat up, took out the ball and pushed it into the pocket of your coat. See how I remember details!"

"Yes," said Laurens. "The ball was found in the coat. I have it."

She did not appear to hear him. "And then comes a momentary blank again," she went on, now with a far-away look in her eyes, "but that soon passed. I knew I had fallen, but from that moment until Fung Wang found and revived me I was again utterly powerless to speak or move—even to close my eyes. I was in a state of suspended animation. Under different circumstances I would have been buried alive. I knew you thought me dead. I remember everything you did, even to putting my handkerchief over my face. I wondered where you found it. I heard you go away. I heard you laugh. I knew your brain had given out. Oh, it was horrible—horrible!"

She broke down and sobbed again. Laurens did not stop her though he would have comforted her after the manner of a man with a maid. "I believe I can guess the rest," he said, reassuringly. "Fung Wang had followed us. He knew when to appear. I have a recollection of seeing him, as in an awful nightmare. He probably revived you with the very

water he stole from us." In a few words Laurens explained.

"And you kept that knowledge from me?"

"The situation was too tragic to worry you while in your state."

"Well, you were right—he did revive me, and I came back to life with more strength than I had when I fell. You lay on the sand. I thought you dead, and so did Fung Wang. He cursed you in English. Then the storm broke suddenly—fiercely. Wang forced me away, but I did not leave without covering your face as you had mine. Oh, you looked terrible!"

She paused, with something like a shudder at the memory. Laurens had watched her as a man watches the play of emotion on the face he loves. She had changed, and yet she was the same, though it was hard to reconcile this superb creature with his recollection of the figure in male clothing. Her face was both more mature and more beautiful. The year had rounded her delicately, and the line of chin and throat fell into the curve of her bosom with bewitching grace. Since the shock of their meeting a faint glow had tinted her cheeks, and her eyes were like stars. The ball-dress she wore gave her the finishing touch. To Laurens she was a picture.

"And then?" he said. "I would like to know it all."

"There is but little more," she returned, "and that is not tragic, in comparison. Fung Wang made me mount your mule, and I remember that he took the box from the saddle of my dead horse. He thought the ball was in it, and when later he discovered it was empty I never witnessed such an agony of rage and disappointment. He cursed me like the beast he is—or was, but it was then too late to go back. Finally we reached a little settlement on the Rio Grande and while there Fung Wang disappeared and I have never heard of him since. I was nursed by a Mexican woman for a few days, and finally crossed the river. I had money enough to get to San Francisco, and went to a friend. I am still with her. That is all my story."

She stopped. From the ball-room came the subdued sound of music, and the air was heavy with the scent of the orange blossoms, but the two were dead to outside influences. Laurens' impulse was to clasp the girl in his arms and tell her again what she had once heard when she lay on the sand and he thought her dying, but he could take no unfair advantage of the unusual situation. "My story is

much more prosaic," he said. "May I ask where your friend's house is?"

"Why, only across these grounds! I had been to the reception here; I ran back to the house for a moment, and returned through the park when—when——"

"When we met. It has been providential!"

"It has been more than wonderful!" she exclaimed. "You will come and see me and——"

She had no time to finish the sentence, nor he to answer, for they were interrupted by footsteps on the pavement, and the cry: "Oh, there he is!" and Mrs. Merrifield appeared with an escort. She laughed as she came up. "I am dreadfully sorry to end your tête-à-tête, Mr. Laurens," she said gaily, "but do you know the time? People are going and I am tired to death. I have been looking for you for half an hour. Pardon me; this is Miss Dalzell, I believe! I met you some months ago, my dear."

When Laurens was about leaving Mrs. Merrifield at the door of her home she held out her hand and looked roguishly at him. "I never saw two people so engrossed in one another as were you and Miss Dalzell. Had you ever met her before?"

"Yes; something over a year ago," was the careless return.

"Then I was wrong when I said you might meet your fate to-night—meaning, of course, the first time. You did not act like an iceberg toward that young lady. Or, at least, the iceberg was rapidly melting."

"I never was an iceberg, Mrs. Merrifield," he replied seriously.

CHAPTER XII

THE TURN OF EVENTS

WHEN Laurens awoke the following morning he came to himself in his old world, to all appearances; but as his brain cleared he suddenly became aware that he had emerged into a new one. He dressed himself with a spirit he had not known for months, and even caught himself whistling.

As he sat at breakfast he picked up his newspaper and while glancing at the headings his eye caught sight of a small paragraph which commanded his immediate attention:

Professor Paul Woodstock, curator of New York's largest museum, who has been traveling in the Orient for the past sixteen months, arrived yesterday from China and will stay at the Palace Hotel for a time before going east. The scientist had trouble regarding the landing of his Chinese servant, but the difficulty has been arranged by the immigration authorities."

Laurens at once became alert. Paul Woodstock

was one of the few men with whom he was really intimate. He had known him well in New York and had last seen him when the two met in China just as Woodstock arrived and Laurens was about leaving. There was no man in the world Laurens would have preferred to see. The two had been veritable cronies in the old days, and the young man's regard for his friend was like that of a brother; he would have trusted Woodstock with his life. He determined to go to him at once, and with the determination it came to him that the curator, antiquarian and scientist, would be the very one to enlighten him regarding the character and value of the mysterious ivory *ojimi*. It would be fitting to be able to give Miss Dalzell a definite knowledge concerning the ball when he returned it. And he would return it that night; in the circumstances there was no necessity of waiting, and he looked forward to seeing her much as an accepted lover might have done, though the word "love" did not cross his mind, nor did he attempt to analyze his present feeling toward the girl who had come back from the dead.

Immediately after breakfast he went to the safe-deposit vault and took out the box containing the ball; half an hour later he was at the Palace Hotel where he sent up his card to Professor Woodstock.

That gentleman was in and welcomed him with an effusiveness which spoke of their intimacy. While the two sat together Laurens told Woodstock his story, and told it fully for the first time since his rescue, only omitting more than a casual reference to the young lady as a prominent actor in the drama. Regarding her he held back all enthusiasm, knowing that his practical bachelor friend would have laughed at any sentimental attitude toward a girl he had known for scarcely a week and of whose real history he knew next to nothing. The curator listened to the tale with the enthusiasm of a boy, and there was much of the boy in Woodstock.

"A devil of a close squeak for you and Miss Dalzell!" he exclaimed, when the account was finished.

"And you say she is in town?"

"We met last night by accident, for the first time since the experience in the desert."

"And what became the beast of a chink?"

"She has no idea, nor have I. He disappeared. As for Callahan and his men, I fancy they are all dead."

"Aye, it's more than likely! Now let me see the ball."

Laurens opened the package and produced the semi-sphere about which had gathered so much

trouble. Like all who had seen it Woodstock was warm in his admiration, but, as with the rest, it was beyond his knowledge though he frankly posed as an expert on curios. "A marvelous thing!" he exclaimed, after a close examination. "I should not care to say how old this is, but it would not surprise me if it dated back to before the Manchu dynasty. Certainly, nothing equaling it has been turned out in China in two hundred years! I know something of modern Chinese characters, but those on the scroll are beyond me! However, I know one man who can tell us about it."

"Who?"

"Count Lito-See, a Japanese Orientalist. We came over in the same steamer and I suppose I got as close to him as a Jap ever allows an Occidental to get. He can translate anything ever written in Chinese, Korean, or any Eastern dialect. He is a profound scholar and delicate in health, like most. He can tell you just when this was carved, and probably, who carved it. He was of the greatest help to me when I was troubled about the landing of my servant, Mow-Sing. By the way, you must remember Mow-Sing! He applied to me the very day you left China, and told me he had been your boy."

Laurens recollected. "Yes, I remember him

well," he returned. "A faithful chap! I did him the questionable service of pulling him out of the Pei-Ho when he was about to commit suicide on account of his poverty, or his having lost caste, or something of the sort. I think I gave him a new idea of life; anyhow, he appeared thankful when I took him on. He was superior to any coolie I met. I would like to see him again."

"He will be in presently," said Woodstock. "Now as to the count. We three will have a little dinner together and go over this ball. To-day is Wednesday. Suppose you meet us at Callamere's; we can have absolute privacy there. Say six-thirty to-morrow night. I will see the Count and make all arrangements."

"Where is Callamere's?" asked Laurens. "I have never heard of the place."

Woodstock's blue eyes widened. "A resident of San Francisco, and never heard of Callamere! Well, perhaps it isn't strange! He doesn't blow a trumpet. But, my dear boy, if you have never experienced Callamere you have never dined! He is several pegs above the ordinary table d'hote proprietors. Pegs! Miles! He's unique, is Callamere! He won't serve more than six to a party, nor less than three, and demands full dress. But

his dinners! Ye gods of Olympus! You will find an exact mingling of comestibles and the different jig-waters which will produce the supreme effect without reaction, and Callamere would be highly insulted if you disturbed the gastronomic balance by eating or drinking less than he puts before you. You can't even smoke your own cigars. The Frenchman has reached the acme of evolution in gustatory progress and has struck nature's secret of both quality and quantity, the result being a feast which expands the soul and does not clog the brain." Woodstock threw his arm affectionately across his friend's shoulder. Laurens laughed. "Callamere's, by all means! Where is it?"

"On one of the most exclusive residence streets in San Francisco; and you could no more get in without a proper introduction than you could have an off-hand interview with the Dowager-Empress of China. Here! I'll give you my card. I know him personally. And bring a lens with you, and—Hello! Come in here, Mow-Sing. A gentleman wishes to see you."

Laurens turned around. In the curtained doorway to an adjoining chamber stood his former servant and as their eyes met the yellow face of the young Chinaman broke into a broad smile. He

greeted his old employer with a demonstration rarely seen in one of his race. After a few minutes Woodstock reached for the box containing the ball. "Mow," he said, "you sabe old Chinese writing, if see?"

The boy shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps can do."

"Then look at this."

The professor snapped open the cover. The young Chinaman stepped toward the table and bent over the box, then he suddenly drew back as if it contained a live snake. Absolute consternation was expressed on his face as he stared at the ball in its crimson bed, the diamond sparkling in the light, and the next instant he went to his knees as Fung Wang had done at sight of it, bowing his head until it touched the Wilton carpet.

Both Laurens and Woodstock were astonished, and the latter looked his amazement as he jumped to his feet. "What in the devil do you mean by such pagan actions!" he exclaimed. "Get up." The boy obeyed.

"You know that ball?" demanded his master.

"Me sabe—me sabe! Where you get?" replied Mow-Sing, and Laurens noticed he was trembling violently.

"It belongs to Mr. Laurens, and it came from your country. What is it?"

There was no answer.

"Tell me at once." The professor's hitherto mild eyes were showing irritation. The boy raised his bent head and looked at him. "Perhaps allee same you killee Mow-Sing, you no makee speak. Me go." And without waiting for permission the boy backed into the next room, his eyes fixed on the box until the curtains fell over him.

"What do you think of that?" asked Woodstock, his face red with anger.

"About as much as I make of the rest of the coil," answered Laurens. "It begins to look as if every Chinaman knows the ball and is afraid of it! It is strange that you or I never heard of it while we were in China!"

"It may be a talisman of one of the Six Companies," said Woodstock, "but that doesn't excuse Mow-Sing. I don't like his attitude; just a sight of the thing made him forget his duty and respect. The ball surely has a history, and it may get you into trouble."

"It certainly exerts a peculiar influence on the Oriental mind," returned Laurens, rising to go. "I only wish I could tell what the *ojimi* really is."

"You'll know to-morrow night," replied Woodstock, and then added: "Why not include the young lady in our party? As the owner of the ball she should be with us. Give her the invitation. I would be delighted to meet her."

"And she would probably be equally delighted to go," said Laurens. "I will see her to-night. If you don't hear from me in the morning you may consider the invitation accepted."

"Good! Remember, six-thirty, sharp! Mow-Sing!"

At his call the boy instantly appeared.

"Show Mr. Laurens to the door."

The order was obeyed. Through the length of the apartment the young Chinaman walked backward, bowing at every step, his eyes fixed on the box in Laurens' hand. At the hall door he made a profound obeisance. It was unusual—exaggerated.

Laurens called on Miss Dalzell that night but was far from having the quiet talk he had anticipated; instead, he found himself something of a lion in the elegant house, the wealthy maiden lady who had taken Josephine in charge being so curious to hear of his adventures that she was blind to his desire. He told of his interview with Woodstock and openly gave the young lady the invitation for the following

evening, an invitation quickly accepted, and when it grew late he left.

Between his desire to meet the Count, to learn the secret of the carving and to be with Josephine for a few hours, together with his curiosity regarding the unique restaurateur, Callamere, Laurens passed the following day with the novel feeling of pleasurable anticipation. He was not ennuied, as was usual, and that day of easy existence stood out strongly in his memory. He looked for plenty of diversion for that evening, and it was a welcome change.

At five o'clock he was dressed; at half-past five he was at Miss Dalzell's house and at quarter past six, with the girl, a radiant beauty in his eyes, he was at Callamere's.

There was nothing to suggest a public house in the fine building before which his limousine halted. At the door Laurens gave Woodstock's card to the liveried flunky, and the two were ushered into a salon where several people in full evening dress were gathered. A few minutes later Monsieur Callamere came into the room, looking more like an European diplomat than a restaurateur, his white hair and mustache giving him a distinguished appearance. From him it was learned that Woodstock and his friend had not yet arrived and that every prepara-

tion had been made for a dinner for four. The professor's tardiness did not surprise Laurens as he was notoriously careless as to time.

But at six-thirty he had not come, and though Laurens began to get a bit nervous, Miss Josephine showed no impatience; she talked to Laurens, and even struck a few chords on the magnificent grand piano in a manner which showed she was familiar with the instrument. Then they wandered around the splendid room looking at the paintings on the walls. They were admiring a genuine Corot on an easel when the flunky who had admitted them approached with a note in his hand. "M'sieu Laurens?" he asked.

"Yes."

"For you, m'sieu. The man, he is waiting."

Laurens turned and saw a Japanese, a high silk hat in his hand, standing between the hall portieres. Instinctively he knew the note had come from Woodstock. He excused himself, opened it and read:

My dear Laurens:

The Count is too indisposed to go out to-night and suggests that we forego Callamere and that you and Miss Dalzell join us at his temporary home, the Villa Sarto. You will enjoy him, and the proprieties will not be outraged as the Countess, a modern lady, will be of the party. With this he sends his secretary and a limousine. He is very anxious to

see the ball. Pardon the tardiness of this and come at once.

WOODSTOCK, *per K.*"

That the note was not in Woodstock's writing was explained by the "per K" after his name, and Laurens had no doubt that it was the work of the Count's secretary from the dictation of the professor. He was disappointed at missing Callamere's dinner, but there was no help for it, and neither Miss Dalzell or himself thought of questioning the sudden change of programme.

As they moved toward the door the waiting Jap advanced with a low bow, and never was politeness more graceful or more nearly perfect than that displayed by Mr. Kimeo. It takes a well-bred Oriental to make the conventional manners of Occidental society appear crude in contrast with his own. The secretary's English was as correct as that of a professed grammarian.

Would the honorable lieutenant and the beautiful lady he was escorting condescend to enter the poor vehicle sent for them, and make glad the heart of the Count, who was all impatience to meet them? And the profound and honorable professor was waiting.

The honorable lieutenant and Miss Dalzell ex-



R. L. -
RIVERA

In less than three minutes Laurens was in a state of
profound bliss

pressed the desire to gratify the Count, and there was much bowing, and much subserviency in getting the lady into her wraps and Laurens into his light overcoat, after which they entered the waiting limousine, the chauffeur sitting at the wheel like a block of wood.

They moved off, Mr. Kimeo chatting constantly and displaying the soul of polite affability. Presently he produced a gold cigarette case. Would the lady indulge? It was not uncommon in his country, and the limousine's windows were all open; moreover, there was nothing like the flavor of his own tobacco to be found in America.

Miss Dalzell gracefully refused but insisted that the gentlemen should smoke. Laurens accepted one of the tiny cigarettes, the secretary placed another between his smiling lips and the two lighted up.

In less than three minutes Laurens was in a state of profound bliss; the swaying of the limousine was like the rhythmic swing of a hammock, and the purring of the fast-moving machine turned to gentle music. Through the window he saw the avenues glide by like a beautiful panorama; every color became intensified and glorious, and commonplace objects took on a new and entrancing aspect. He became dimly conscious that the ride was longer than he

had anticipated, but he did not care; why should he? By his side sat his lovely companion, the warmth of whose body was like a caress, while opposite, forever talking like a poet, was the most polite and fascinating fellow he had ever met. Laurens was in a state of profound mental peace—a peace such as he had never known. He drifted into an exquisitely languorous state, and finally a golden veil seemed to fall over and envelop his brain, blotting out every sensation.

CHAPTER XIII

THE AWAKENING

WHEN John Laurens opened his eyes to practical facts he discovered that he was no longer in a limousine but was lying on a carved bed covered with silk and canopied with the same material. He sat up and looked around in amazement. The room he was in was large and lavishly furnished, in Chinese style for the most part, but he noticed a grand piano, a magnificent book-case, a carved buffet and a few American chairs in rich upholstery; the rest, from the thick rugs on the polished floor to the great bronze lamp, which was lighted and hung from the high ceiling, were all of the Orient. Several pieces of heavy bric-a-brac were set around the room, and a wonderful inlaid censer breathed out a delicately scented vapor which lay in a strata on the stagnant air. In the exact center of the apartment was a large carved

table of polished teakwood, and directly above it a long skylight, its several sections closed.

Laurens noted these things slowly and with bewildered senses, then he became alive to the fact that he was clothed in a voluminous silken robe, while on his feet were felt-soled sandals decorated with colored stones matching the gorgeousness of his gown.

Though mentally at sea he was not worried. He knew by the unnatural taste in his mouth that he had been under the influence of some drug, and as his mind cleared so did his recollection and he was aware that he had been the victim of a doped cigarette. It did not even remotely occur to him to wonder why Mr. Kimeo had given him a drugged smoke. It was so undoubtedly a mistake of some kind. The cigarettes must somehow have been accidentally placed in the secretary's case. It was not unusual for Orientals to have such things in their possession. Doped cigarettes sometimes came in handy. But there could not possibly have been any intention of giving him, John Laurens, one of them. He wondered what kind of a head Mr. Kimeo had to keep his wits. On himself the effect had been tremendous, and he figured that on his arrival at the villa where the Count was staying he was in

such a helpless condition that he had been put to bed to sleep off the effects of the drug. It had been done with Oriental thoroughness and hospitality. Doubtless Woodstock would soon appear. He hoped his friend had properly apologized for such a display of unseasoned weakness. And what had Miss Dalzell thought of such an exhibition?

Beyond the staleness of his mouth he felt perfectly well. He got to his feet and shuffled around the sumptuous apartment, then made a discovery that startled him: His own evening dress and underclothing had been removed and with them had gone the lacquered box containing the ivory ball, and at the same time he became aware of the fact that it was morning instead of evening; that the light was growing stronger. Was it possible that the night had passed? He must let it be known that he was awake at last. And what had become of Miss Dalzell? What an opinion she must have of him!

He soon discovered a heavy double door behind the tapestry-draped walls, but they were locked and he searched the apartment for some other means of egress, only to learn that there was not even a window behind the hangings and that, save for the skylight high above, no means of ventilation. It was little wonder that the air was heavy.

He had hardly completed his leisurely examination when he heard the click of a lock and saw the drapery swing over the folding doors; the next instant a Chinaman appeared from behind them.

"Where am I?" he asked; but instead of answering the man glided noiselessly around the room, covered the exhaling censer, extinguished the light in the bronze lantern, which showed only a gleam of rainbow colors, and opened a section of the skylight by means of a rod behind the draperies. Laurens followed him with his eyes. "You speak English?" he finally questioned, surprised at the manner in which he was ignored.

If the man heard him he did not heed him, for instead of answering he bowed low and glided behind the hangings; a second later Laurens heard the door open and, not to be played with any longer, he jumped for the entrance. But he was too late; the heavy mahogany was closed and fastened; it would not even rattle when he grasped the silver knobs and shook them.

And then his growing suspicion that there was something radically wrong in the conditions crystallized into absolute certainty. By what right had anyone to lock him up in this luxurious apartment? Why had he been insulted by the continued silence

of a servant? He hammered on the door with his bare fists, but no notice was taken from the outside. With an outspoken oath he turned from the door and as he did so he heard a faint click and the yet gloomy room was suddenly swimming in the soft light of indirect electrical illumination. Then Laurens saw that he was not alone. A man—a Chinaman—was standing by the table in the center of the room, quietly regarding him.

The man was dressed in a flowery robe of embroidered silk and on his head was a silk skull-cap with the coral button of a mandarin on its top. As he stood there motionless, his arms folded in his flowing sleeves, he made an impressive figure.

Laurens was relieved. He was sure that here was his unknown host, Count Lito-See, overlooking the incongruity of the fact that there was a Chinese mandarin's costume on the back of a Japanese aristocrat. He thought only of having a satisfactory explanation of the situation, at the same time wondering why the Count should have come at that early hour and alone.

It was the Chinaman who spoke first. "Well, sir," he began quietly, "it appears that my honored guest is greatly excited over something!" His English was perfect.

Laurens bowed politely and stepped toward him, but as he came within two paces he staggered back. "*You! You!*" he exclaimed.

"So the honorable Laurens remembers me?"

"Remember you! Fung Wang!"

The Chinaman smiled. "It was a name I chose to go under for a time—and for a purpose, sir."

"Good God! I thought you dead until——"

"And doubtless wished I was," came the interruption. "Sit down, my honorable friend. You will find that chair easier than the sand. You have much to ask, perhaps, and I have something to explain." He spoke in a smooth voice and there was nothing to resent in either tone or words.

"But I have much to demand," returned Laurens. "Where am I? And how came I here with you?"

"It is a natural curiosity couched in your old commanding manner," was the light rejoinder. "As for the first; you are my honored guest in my house; for the second, well, you will soon surmise."

"In *your* house! I am decidedly bewildered! I never dreamed—I knew I had been drugged, and——"

"At my orders," was the quiet interruption; "therefore you already know the how of your being here. You undoubtedly wish to know the why of it."



"Kidnaped! and by your orders!"

Laurens stiffened. "Kidnaped! And by your orders!"

The Chinaman bowed, "My tactics were not yours at the time of our last encounter—but they were as successful."

"And your motive is plain enough now, sir! You did this for the purpose of stealing the *ojimi* I took from you—stealing it again."

For an answer the man drew a hand from his voluminous sleeve and opening it showed the ivory ball. "Sir," he said, "this is not yours, nor did it belong to Miss Dalzell, nor to the consumptive fool who stole it from her, nor to the fool's half-brother, nor to the German who looted it from the temple of the Eye of God. Sit down, sir, and become less excited; you will better appreciate what I am about to tell you."

There was something both persuasive and authoritative in the voice, and Laurens dropped into a tufted chair by the table and stared at the Chinaman as if he were a perfect stranger. He could hardly believe his senses. The fat face was the same and there was the same inscrutability in the narrow, slanting eyes, but the man's manner had changed mightily; all its previous subserviency had gone and there was now a dignity about the quondam servant

which had never been shown but once, and that in the desert. The young man was not as much astonished at what had been said as at the metamorphosed coolie himself; he had never seen him in this mood, and there was something about him which commanded a feeling he was unused to; that of fear of a fellow man. The poise of Fung Wang was perfect, his calmness unruffled, and that he considered the American infinitely his inferior was as plain as if the feeling had been set to words. He seated himself on the opposite side of the table and opening a humidor took out a handful of cigarettes.

"Try these, sir. No, you need not be afraid—they are harmless. I shall not attempt to take away your senses again—in that way. I have accomplished most of my purpose; the rest depends upon yourself."

"Your depth is profound," returned Laurens. "I think an explanation is due me. Fung Wang, you masqueraded as a coolie once, now you mask as a——"

"I beg your honored pardon," came the quick intervention. "I am not *en masque*. I am a mandarin of China. My house is that of the Flying Dragon. My name is Chow T'su."

"Delighted, I'm sure!" was the sarcastic return.

"I suppose it would be useless to ask why you posed as a coolie, or, perhaps as a coolie are posing as a person of distinction."

"It would not be useless," was the purring rejoinder. "Come sir, I would not insult you. I will play my game with all my cards face up."

"Where is Miss Dalzell?"

"That in good time, sir, again depending on yourself. As for you, you are my honored guest."

"Then bring me my clothing and terminate your hospitality. I fail to value it. How long have I been here?"

"About twelve hours, Mr. Laurens; and the door will open for you—in the near future, I hope. I have tried to provide for your comfort even to giving you these, my private apartments."

"What in the devil's name are you driving at?" demanded the young man. "You have the cursed ball, which at least is not yours! What more do you wish? How did you know I was alive?"

"Sir, your manners need correcting," was the calm return. The Chinaman lighted a cigarette, inhaling its smoke. "Your spirit is far too rough," he continued, exhaling the fumes in a cloud as he spoke. "Witness your attack on me in the desert! It will be my pleasure to correct that."

"What in hell do you mean?"

"You are crude," was the soft return, "yet, doubtless, you would boast of the superiority of your breed. Look!" he continued, holding out the ball. "This ivory was carved during the dynasty of She-T'su, known to history as Kubla-Kahn, the Mongol, and that which it contains belonged to Kong-fu-sie, whom you know as Confucius. It is the Eye of God, and for fifteen hundred years it has been revered by his house, which is mine, the house of Fei-Lung, the Flying Dragon.

"Until a few years ago it lay in the temple which had been built for it by my ancestors in Tientsin—lay there until the boasted civilization of the West invaded my country. Then a weak priest brought down a curse on me and mine, himself succumbing to the curse written on this sacred relic. The temple was looted. I witnessed the outrage."

For a moment, the Chinaman paused, and into his little eyes there came a look of hatred and fury as his words seemed to conjure up that picture out of the past which proved to the waiting Laurens that it was no small matter to the fanatical Oriental. Then slowly, reminiscently, with venom in each word, Fung Wang, or Chow T'su, began to speak.

It was almost as though he had forgotten he had

an auditor. He seemed to be recalling the scenes of that distant time as a cherished memory of hatred. But as he spoke, and with an eloquence that Laurens would never have suspected him of possessing, with a might of descriptive power, there envisioned itself before the eyes of the American's mind a vivid picture of the temple's looting and the events that led to it.

It was high noon in the city of Tientsin on a July day in 1900. The willows, pines and walnuts in the grove of the Temple of the Eye of God trembled under the jar of distant heavy guns.

For Tientsin, the Beautiful, was being besieged by the "Allied Armies of the West"—English, French, United States, Russian, Italian, Japanese, and German. The uprising of the *I-Ho-Chuan*, or Society of Righteous Fists, otherwise the "Boxers," had brought Western civilization to the rescue of its children. In Peking, the white and Christian population had fled to the uncertain protection of the legations and none knew their fate—none could know until the way was opened to the Imperial City, and Tientsin was its gate.

History tells of that day's combat—of the breaching of the ancient walls by the allies—of the mas-

sacre of Chinamen, and the subsequent looting which disgraced the Powers and their boasted civilization.

But in the grove, on the far side of Tientsin, save for the portentous roar of artillery, it was very quiet that noon; even the birds were still beneath the spell of fear and the hot sun.

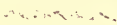
The Temple of the Eye of God was of itself small, but like all Oriental places of worship, it was ornate with gargoyles, grotesque carvings and wide projecting eaves. The box-like huts of the beggar-priests of the order stretched out on either hand, insignificant hovels without interest, and dominated by the central structure which was itself almost dominated by the flight of wide steps leading to the entrance from an avenue lined with ancient stone lanterns. The whole was the embodiment of Chinese spirit four thousand years old, and was dedicated to Confucius, who erected a code of morals which has advanced, or declined, into a religion.

The dim interior of the temple was characteristic. There was the usual array of hideous gods, teak-wood carvings black with age, gilded scroll-work, smouldering joss-sticks, beautifully embroidered silk banners, jade ornaments, porcelain jars of fabulous worth, black rafters beginning and ending in darkness, and nooks buried in deep, mysterious shadow

from which anything might come. It was a perfect nightmare of a place to the Occidentalist—a place suggestive of secret orgies and revolting ceremonies. The cold, set faces of the grotesque idols seemed to have a repellent intelligence. One had the desire to look on the tessellated floor for traces of old blood-stains.

The exceptional feature to this interior was something which resembled an altar in a Christian church. It was of elaborately carved teakwood inlaid with ivory darkened by time, and built high upon it was a pagoda-like reliquary—the compartment which held the Eye of God itself.

Travelers in China have remarked that a real worshipper is rarely seen in any temple, but on this day there were two in the sanctuary of the Eye of God, one prostrate before the altar, his shaven forehead pressed to the checkered pavement in an attitude of extreme devotion. His dress, his long, polished finger-nails and his silk-entwined queue showed him to be an aristocrat, while the broad, black squares on the breast and back of his silk robe, squares in which was embroidered the figure of a crane, and the coral button on top of his silk cap, showed him to be a Civil Mandarin of the First Class. Behind him bent a young man, or boy, bear-



ing the white wand of a *majordomo*. By the closed door of the reliquary stood a tall priest in ancient ceremonials, his head bent, his hands crossed upon his breast, but his attitude of humility did not hide the fire in his oblique eyes. Two or three minor priests stood in the shadowy background, all in postures of devotion.

Presently the mandarin arose and the boy stood by his side. At that moment the rumbling thunder of guns suddenly ceased. The priest let fall his ceremonial attitude, and spoke:

"Does Chow T'su bring news?" he asked in a colloquial voice.

"I bring warning," was the mandarin's return. "Li-Hung-Chang is a fool! No argument but that of victorious force ever appeals to him. Now he will have to bend before the foreign devils. They will win. Do you mark the sudden silence?"

The priest bowed. "And your Highness's warning?"

"Though its secret is not known, the Eye of God is in danger. The sacred relic is no longer safe, and once it is lost my house will fall—my ancestors will sorrow—my life be undone."

"But the written command——"

"I know," interrupted the other, something like

a spasm passing over his fat face. " . . . the written command is that no violence must be used in defending it. But the priests of the temple must protect it. It may be hidden in holy ground——Hark!"

The exclamation was caused by a distant cry which was not repeated.

"After all," continued the mandarin, "what is there to fear. Kong-fu-cie will protect his temple as well as the honor of his house, Fei-Lung, the Flying Dragon! I would look upon the relic once again. Let me see and worship."

The priest bowed in silence and advanced to the front of the altar where he prostrated himself, then arising, opened the door of the reliquary. Within was a jade box which he took out and placed upon the altar. As he lifted the cover Chow T'su again bowed low, his forehead touching the floor. Straightening himself he looked reverently at the thing within the box. Like one under an inspiration he began to whisper, addressing his attendant:

"Mow-Sing, behold the Eye of God upon which none but those of the house of the Flying Dragon have ever looked and lived!" He spoke in the sing-song of a Chinese ritual, his eyes fixed upon what, in the dim light, appeared to be a black ball of about

the size and shape of a small egg. In one end of it something glittered.

He went on, his voice rising. "Once it belonged to the great Kong-fu-cie. It has rested in his hand and felt the dew of his divine breath. It is the talisman of his family, of which you are one and I am the head.* Upon it is carved his command, and his curse follows the mortal who disobeys it."

The man was growing excited. His slits of eyes enclosed in fat glowed like a miser's as he counts his increasing hoard, and his voice had risen, when above it came the crack of a rifle close at hand, the shot being followed by the sound of running feet and the shouts of men.

It was the mandarin who first gathered the import of the sudden interruption. "The city has fallen!" he shouted, and stretched out his arm for the ball; but the priest was too quick for him. Striking up the advancing hand he snapped down the jade cover of the miniature chest, pushed it into its repository and closed the door. He had hardly done so when the entrance of the temple was burst open and several panic-stricken Chinese soldiers rushed in, closely followed by a disorderly squad of German

*At this day there exists in China about two hundred and fifty lineal descendants of Confucius.

yagers. Without listening to appeals for mercy they cut down the fugitives, then looked around the dim interior.

But they saw little. By then the mandarin had disappeared, the boy, Mow-Sing, was crouched in a corner, the lower priests had fled shrieking and only the Chief of the Temple stood to confront them, his thin figure drawn to its full height, his back against the sacred altar and in his hand the ancient Chinese battle-ax which had been for years sleeping beneath the shrine.

More Germans came running in, and one of them tilted his broad bayonet against a wooden idol near the priest, the blow splitting the hideous head from brow to chin. The man lived only long enough to catch the gleam of a descending ax and a pair of fiery eyes.

His death was all that was needed. Half an hour later but little remained of the interior of the Temple of the Eye of God. The altar and the reliquary were overthrown and splintered, the ancient jars demolished, the banners torn, the carvings destroyed, the gods defiled. Everything that could be wrecked was wrecked and over the wanton destruction glared the few idols which were too heavy to be more than marred.

Amid the débris lay the bodies of the slain Chinamen, and among them was that of the devoted priest. Mow-Sing, with the cunning of his kind, had saved his life by feigning death, and lay face down on receiving a stunning blow from the butt of a German musket.

After its complete demolition the place was deserted as suddenly as it had been entered, but the last soldier to leave, a German sergeant, noticed something lying on the floor among the green fragments of a jade box. He picked it up. It was a carved ivory ball black with age. Dropping it into his pocket as a souvenir he ran out and joined his looting companions.

He had not seen the mandarin who, having thrown off his robe, had climbed to a shadowy rafter and witnessed the entire outrage, horror and fear in his cowardly heart and hate in his narrow eyes. He saw the German take the sacred talisman from the floor and go out, and then, when the place became quiet, he climbed from his perch and grovelled on the blood-stained pavement in an ecstasy of mental suffering and spiritual degradation. Finally he crawled to the remains of the dead priest and knelt beside it. "Even you—a priest of the temple—have fallen under the curse!" he muttered. "You dared

to raise a weapon in defence of God's Eye! You have disobeyed!" Then, like a man half demented, Chow T'su sent up a vow to his ancestors—a vow, the sacredness of which can be understood only by a Chinaman. In his own conscience Chow T'su, mandarin, pagan, rich, powerful, and as cruel as a Chinese hell, had lost caste to himself through the loss of the talisman of his family, and he, the leader of the house of the Flying Dragon, could not hold up his head again until his honor was vindicated by its recovery. Oriental ethics decreed that his prestige had gone and could not be restored until he had "saved his face" by restoring the Eye of God to the temple which had been its resting place for more than a thousand years.

The West does not comprehend the thought of the East, and it is doubtful if it ever will. For the West believes in the body politic, the East in the individual. China has no patriotism; it even has no national air; every man is for himself and the devil may—and does—take the hindmost.

For that reason Mow-Sing lay neglected by his master; and when that master finally crept away in the twilight the boy awoke to full consciousness and found himself alone. His wand of office was broken. He knew he was an outcast. He, too, crept away.

And so night fell over Tientsin.

Once more Chow T'su paused and this time Laurens knew the man was scanning the years that lay between the time of which he had spoken and the present. And his thoughts were not pleasant. The cruelty that shone from the little eyes, the obvious desire for vengeance, spoke as plainly as any words. He suddenly seemed to remember that he was explaining for the benefit of Laurens—was, as he had expressed it, “playing the game with his cards face up.” Well, he had explained. Now Laurens knew the significance of the ivory ball, and there was that confidence in the relator's manner that showed that it could not matter now—that Laurens would never be in a position to make use of his knowledge or to impart it. Chow T'su looked at his unwilling guest confidently and went on:

“That soldier of an empire based on a rotten foundation who discovered the Eye of God knew nothing of its value. Later he sold it to an American—a Colonel Dalzell—for a mere nothing. But he paid for his crime against the house of Fei-Lung, as all must do who touch the ivory ball—for that night the soldier was killed in a drunken row.”

Another pause; then Chow T'su took up the

thread of his narrative, but a change had come in his manner. Almost it were as though he pleaded for understanding and compassion.

"Sir," he said, holding up the ivory ball," my soul died with the loss of this. Over the body of that murdered priest I made a vow, and a Chinaman is true to his vows. I have carried mine to a finish. It was easy for me to trace the ball to the colonel, who recognized it as a rare work of art, if nothing else, and then I, of a great house, demeaned myself to becoming a servant to a foreigner.

"The day came when Colonel Dalzell accidentally discovered the secret of the Eye of God, and he foolishly told it to his half-brother. You wonder why I did not kill the colonel when by doing so I could have possessed myself of this more than precious thing. Sir, I would have done so, as I would have killed you, only for the command written here. It is not permitted to obtain or retain the relic by violence, though stealth is always justified. Through those years, however, I had no chance. The ivory ball was always too carefully guarded for even my cunning to obtain possession of it without using force. I even would have had to use force with the pitifully sick man you saw, for he was the

worst of them all. See! Here is the command dictated by my noble ancestor!"

With his long finger-nail Chow T'su traced the obscure characters running through the carved scroll, the characters Professor Woodstock had not been able to read, and the Chinaman's voice was reverential as he translated:

"He who holds me unlawfully shall fade like the leaves of summer. He who uses violence to possess me shall die accursed."

"The curse has worked. The priest, the soldier, the colonel and his criminal brother, are dead. You took it from me by violence and——"

"And I am still alive," interrupted Laurens.

"Your saving grace was that you did not take it for yourself. However, you will bear witness that I have not used violence on you."

"You make a cursed fine distinction," was the return. Laurens looked at the ball in the man's hand and could not help feeling a species of reverence for the object which, from the Chinaman's statement, was older than the Christian religion. That Chow T'su was a fanatic admitted of no doubt, though the fact seemed inconsistent with his evident education. Laurens believed his story; the man had en-

dured suffering, insult, and had even risked his life to obtain the ball. It was hard to realize, and for the moment the young man forgot his own treatment.

"Do you have faith in the occult powers of a bit of carved ivory, however old?" he sneered.

"Do you believe in wealth? In ambition?" asked the other, in a peculiar tone.

"They have their uses."

"They have, indeed! Sir, I am rich. Where you can lay down one dollar I can lay down three, yet our gold combined could not begin to purchase either the power or the glory of this ball at which you are inclined to scoff. Even from your Christian standard of values you will confess this. Look, sir!"

As he spoke the last words he pressed, then twisted, the diamond on the head of the dragon and the semi-sphere fell apart lengthwise. The Chinaman bowed low as he laid the segments on the table.

Laurens was more than astonished at the fact that the ball could be opened. He had thought of the possibility and had examined it closely for a hidden joint without finding one; however, as Chow T'su bowed before the segments of the ball Laurens forgot the matter of its opening by its content. Involuntarily he came to his feet.

As a child of the twentieth century, in which the unacknowledged god is the Almighty Dollar, he might well have bent low himself; for snugly fitted into the center of the ovoid was an enormous uncut diamond somewhat larger than the great Koh-i-noor, the counterfeit of which Laurens had seen reproduced in glass. But unlike any uncut diamond he had ever known it seemed to have an internal light of its own—a white radiance which penetrated the dull surface of the stone and gave to it the effect of a human eye overspread with the veil of a cataract. In short, the thing looked like a white eye and it was easy to understand why it had been called the Eye of God.

To Laurens, who at once recognized the value of the gem, it was no wonder that Fung Wang, or whoever he might be, had devoted years to its possession; it was no wonder that the pseudo-major, an expert, had hated to die and leave it. The innate cupidity within the young American—within every man—came to the surface as he bent over the wonderful stone. “By Jove!” he exclaimed, carried away by the gem’s magnificance, “I am not surprised that you took a risk for such a thing! Why did you not tell me instead of letting me maul you?”

Before answering Chow T’su arose to his feet

and taking the halves of the container pressed them together with a faint snap, after which he placed the ball in his bosom and folded his arms.

"Would you have believed my right to it?" he asked. "Would you have quietly passed back to me that which is worth the world to the house of Fei-Lung, and to you and your kind more than a half a million of dollars? I distrust your veneer of civilization. More than a year ago I bowed before your insults, I bowed before your will—and waited. I have not waited in vain. In assaulting me you perhaps thought you were doing your duty. You were not; no principle was considered; you were merely playing the part of a Don Quixote, for the favor of a girl."

Laurens colored. "I was ignorant of the facts, as you give them, and——"

"Does God or man condone ignorance of the law?" cut in the Chinaman.

"Chow T'su," returned Laurens, rising, "I believe all you have told me. I understand your motives, and respect them. I apologize for my unwarranted assault on you. Is that not enough?"

"No," was the quiet reply.

"You are taking an absurdly tragic view of a small matter!"

"Absurd! A small matter!" broke out the Oriental, his inscrutable eyes emitting something like a flash. "Sir, my family dates from an era, not a year. My pedigree is one beside which the aristocracy of Europe has the lineage of an hour. Beside outraging my person you derided, laughed at and cursed my ancestors. Do you not know what that means to a Chinaman?"

"But, sir, I have tendered an apology."

"Confucius says: 'He who rides a tiger cannot dismount.' "

"I catch your meaning," returned Laurens, his temper rising. "You admit being implacable. Permit me to leave your house. I am intruding."

The Chinaman looked at him, a slow, evil smile spreading his thick lips and disclosing his yellow teeth. "Free sitters at the play always grumble most!" he said, with a plain expression of contempt. "Sir, a year ago I lay prostrate before you, cut to the soul; in your turn you shall sink your pride to the dust."

"To you? Submit to you? Show me out of this cursed place instantly," demanded Laurens, taking a threatening step toward the man. Chow T'su backed a pace and clapped his hands, and as he did so the

curtains behind him parted and two of his countrymen, armed with bare yataghans, advanced quickly to his side. The mandarin smiled broadly.

“You see, my friend!”

CHAPTER XIV

A GILDED CAGE

LAURENS did see. The significance of the attitude of the still smiling Chinaman and his armed retainers came to him with the nature of a shock. He saw that the matter was one not to be treated lightly, condoned by mere apology or improved through personal violence. It became plain to the angry American that the treacherous Oriental was terribly in earnest; and with the full realization there was a quick appreciation of his own serious situation—a knowledge that he had become the prey of a revengeful fanatic. And what of Miss Daltzell? In his consternation his face might have reflected his thought for his tormentor seemed to read it.

“Mr. Laurens,” said Chow T’su, “the feeling I have for you does not extend to any other. The lady is safe. I hate your nation. I hate its overbearing attitude of superiority, and have taught others to

hate as I do. But for you there is an added, personal animus which I hold for no one else. The fate of the woman you love will largely depend upon your behavior. Do you wish to see her?"

"Is she in this house?"

"She is, as a respected guest."

"Take me to her at once."

"Do you demand it as a right, or ask it as a favor?"

Laurens flamed, forgetting the advantages of policy. "I demand it as a right. Why should I ask a favor of you?"

"For the purpose of obtaining it, I should imagine," was the cool return. "Your present spirit makes it impossible for me to comply with your wish. You will have to acquire both patience and respect—two qualities you conspicuously lack. It will be my happiness to become your teacher."

The words were uttered with a calm insolence that was staggering, and had it not been for the presence of the armed retainers Laurens would have thrown himself on the grinning Oriental. As it was his impotent rage fairly choked him. The Chinaman looked at him for a moment, then turned the knife in the wound.

"Let me assure you that the lady in question has

no expectation of seeing you. It may be that she will lose faith in you. Later, I may perhaps bring you together; in the meantime you may enjoy life here at my expense."

"You mean that you will lie to Miss Dalzell?"

The other bowed. "You might truthfully say that I have."

"Good God! And you make us your prisoners?"

"Pardon me! You are my honored guests. Would you have me use unnecessary violence? You did that once, and for it you must pay."

"But the lady—why did you trap her?"

"Sir," answered Chow T'su, "I did not know which of you held the Eye of God. I took you both, and to a man of your penetration it must be plain that Miss Dalzell can not be freed at present. She would immediately make my plans abortive."

"Curse your soul!" exploded Laurens. "You lured us to this house through a lie, and now you hope to work out your petty vengeance on me for doing what any real man would have done under the circumstances! How did you know of my existence?"

"I did not know until lately," was the calm answer. "Until two days ago I thought you had escaped me by dying in the desert. As I have told

you, I will play my cards openly. You went to your friend, Woodstock. You met your old servant, who is of my house. You discussed your plans with your friend, but you forgot that a Chinaman has ears and wits and knows their use. Having rediscovered the talisman what should Mow-Sing do but come to me? You will surmise the rest."

Laurens ground his teeth. "You overlook the fact that Professor Woodstock will look me up!"

"I think not," was the quiet rejoinder. "The honorable Woodstock received a note yesterday afternoon. It was from the honorable Laurens who regretted that the indisposition of Miss Dalzell and his own sudden call from town would compel him to postpone meeting Count Lito-See who, by the way, could not have furnished the knowledge you have already acquired."

"Your ingenuity is hellish!" shouted the young man, now beside himself. "Send off your guard, you coward, and meet me on an equal footing. I will teach you a lesson."

"I have had mine. You forget that I am to be your teacher now."

The tone was exasperating in its smoothness and ease. An unholy but helpless rage possessed the young man at the insulting attitude of the Chinaman.

He could hardly think coherently, and his strength and nerve force had been so played upon by the drug from the effect of which he had recently recovered, and the enormity of the conditions surrounding him, that he felt fairly sick. But he had sense enough to know that another verbal explosion would be met by the *sang froid* of his tormentor, and as an indication of a chafing spirit it would be enjoyed. He staggered back to his chair and sank into it.

"I will leave you for a time," said Chow T'su, after a moment of quiet contemplation of Laurens' lax figure. "You have here all the necessities of life and many of its luxuries. There are cigars and cigarettes in the humidor, wines in the sideboard and books in the case. I recommend you to the study of Confucius. If you wish attendance you have but to strike the gong." He pointed to a bronze disk hung from a bracket, then with a low bow backed through the hangings, followed by his silent guards. Laurens heard the door open and close, and he heard it lock.

Long he sat alone in his elegant prison unheeding the passage of time—long enough for him to get his thoughts into something like order. Though the conditions were monstrous, he realized that he must make no attempt at violence until it could be done

on a firmer basis than had yet been offered him. He saw, too, that whatever vengeance the Chinaman had planned it might be taken with but small risk. No one but Woodstock would much care where he was, and Woodstock had been provided for. As for the young lady; if Chow T'su had not lied she was in the house and would be missed from her home. And certainly she would be searched for, though Laurens considered that the chances of her being found were not great. Doubtless her wily captor had provided for that contingency as he had for others.

The young man made up his mind to one thing: Until force could be used to advantage he would meet his oily host on the latter's chosen ground of formal courtesy and a diplomatic concealment of real intentions.

It was with a suffocating feeling of desperation that Laurens arrived at these conclusions, and by then physical action had become necessary if he was to retain his mental balance. To relieve the terrible tension of his nerves he arose and set about examining his prison.

A short inspection proved that his jailer had not deceived him regarding the luxuries of the place, for, beside the main apartment, there was an elegant

bathroom, a small dining-room, perfect in its Oriental appointments, and in another but smaller apartment was a den, or completely furnished opium joint, with its lamp, pipes and a divan, beside a quantity of the drug itself. These rooms were separated by movable screens some eight feet high, the entire suite being lighted only by the skylight and the electric fixtures hanging from the ceiling, the latter still glowing though it was now broad day.

Laurens again examined the walls behind the hangings and discovered a small door he had previously overlooked. It led from the opium den but it was knobless and immovable. He figured that Chow T'su had made his dramatic appearance by its means, but it offered no chance for escape. Suddenly the solution of the character of his quarters dawned on the young man. He was in what had at one time been the picture-gallery of the mansion; the undecorated and nail-scored walls, together with the long skylight, told him that. And it was equally clear that the great room had been altered to suit the Oriental taste for compactness and elegance.

Having finished a general inspection the young man went into details, examining each piece of furniture and testing its weight. A teakwood cabinet near the piano brought him hope. In one of its

drawers he found his watch and pocket accessories, and in pulling open a small cupboard he discovered a revolver lying on a shelf where it had probably been forgotten. In a flash he transferred it to the folds of his gown and continued his examination. In a large, tray-like drawer he came upon an array of drugs laid in perfect order, each vial clearly labeled with such names as: "Chloroform," "Sat. Sol. Hyd. Chloral," and "Potasse Cyanide." It was a deadly array of virulent poisons, and he wondered why they were there. In another drawer was a set of razors and shaving essentials, and in still another he found a rope of silk, one end of which was fastened into the hangman's conventional noose.

There was little else to interest him. In the buffet were wines of various kinds, together with brandy and whisky, enough to last a toper for months, and its polished top was set with filled decanters and sparkling wine glasses.

Having satisfied himself that there was no one concealed by the draperies, but with the fear that there was an eye on him from some loophole, he lay down on the bed like one weary, as indeed he was, and with his hope fixed on the revolver, endeavored to discover if it was loaded. He soon found that it was. He could feel the ridges of the

five cartridges in the chamber and on extracting one felt the pointed bullet which capped it.

The possession of a charged weapon gave Laurens courage and the steadying effect he needed, and with the quieting of his nerves he discovered that he was ravenously hungry. Remembering Chow T'su's directions he arose and banged on the gong. The summons was almost instantly answered by the same Chinaman who had previously been deaf to his questions.

"Bring breakfast," he demanded, as if he were master. The man bowed and retired. In something like twenty minutes he appeared at the hangings of the opening of the dining-room, though how he got there was a mystery to Laurens. Bowing, he pulled the drapery aside and the prisoner saw a low table on which was a plentiful supply of food. He ate heartily in spite of the fear that he might be drugged, his attendant quick to fill every want, though not a word did he speak. And Laurens did not speak; neither did he threaten. His line of action was not yet clear and, moreover, he felt it would be useless to attempt to deal first with a servant; Chow T'su was the only one to whom an appeal to arms would prove effective.

The young man finished his meal without any of

the ill results he had feared, and returned to the larger chamber. And there he sat smoking and thinking while the hours went by and until the sun went down and the skylight dimmed. The silence was oppressive; not a sound came from outside, nor did anyone intrude on him, and he was so wrapped in his thoughts that he took little note of time until the coolie came in again, lighted the lamp, turned on the electric illumination and stood bowing before him as if waiting for orders. By then Laurens had come to a fixed determination and knew about what he was going to do.

"Tell your master I wish to see him," he commanded.

The man made a profound bow and departed. Presently the door opened and Chow T'su strode into the room. "You sent for me?"

"I did. As a host who makes a virtue of his hospitality you are remiss; you should at least dine with your guest, and he is starving." The words though quietly spoken were hardly conciliatory.

"I hope I know my duty as a host," was the soft return. "I was awaiting your honorable pleasure and had begun to think you wished to starve me. I fear the day has been monotonous to a degree. I

invite you to a change. You will dine with me in another apartment."

"What time is it?" asked Laurens.

"Eight o'clock. By the way, you will find your watch and valuables in the cabinet. I will escort you, if you are ready. We will be quite informal."

Laurens set his teeth to curb his tongue, bowing his acquiescence. The Oriental clapped his hands and at once the doors were thrown open and the young man saw the hall for the first time; he also saw three Chinamen standing just outside of the entrance and thought it well that he had not acted hastily and threatened Chow T'su when he first came in.

With the obsequiousness of a servant his host bowed before him as he led the way into the hall. It was a great corridor with a number of tall doors opening into it, and on either side was a row of Italian marble pillars. The floor was of marble and in the middle of it was a board on an easel. It was covered with Chinese characters and at its foot was a deep cushion. Laurens recognized it at once as the ancestral record of the house which is usually set in the main passage of a Chinaman's dwelling and daily worshipped by the family. Beyond this

there was no furniture but a chair and an earthen tray by the door from which Laurens emerged.

Preceded and followed by his guards he went down the hall with Chow T'su by his side until they came to a small room. Its window was draped and, like the hall, it had little furniture. Beside the low table, the cushions surrounding it, and an inlaid stand on which stood a telephone there was nothing in the way of fittings though the walls were banked with potted palms. In the ceiling was a cluster of shaded electric lights.

As Laurens saw the telephone he saw what he considered a new chance. When the time came to act he would shoot Chow T'su, if necessary, dispose of any henchman present, barricade the door with the heavy palms and send a message to the police. It would be very simple, and the law would justify him for killing the Chinaman, if he remained obdurate. The picture of subsequently freeing Josephine flashed through his mind, and it steadied him in his purpose.

Without further ceremony Chow T'su motioned Laurens to a seat at the table and squatted his own fat figure opposite, then clapped his hands; the guard disappeared and two waiters came in loaded with dishes from which they served the meal. It

was all silently and swiftly done with military precision and without a word being spoken. Laurens ate with the appetite of a healthy animal but drank little of the wine offered, not wishing to muddle his brains. The dinner was prosaic enough, its courses differing but little from those to which he had been used.

"You will observe that I have altered my national custom on your honorable account," said Chow T'su, indicating the dishes and the knives and forks set with each plate, instead of the usual chop-sticks. Laurens made no reply and not another word passed between them until the last dish was removed and cigars were brought in. The attendants were then dismissed and the two were alone.

"Hereafter the honorable Laurens will dine by himself," said the Chinaman. "His irregular hours, his coarse appetite and coarser style are too eccentric for my taste." He blew a cloud of smoke from his lips.

"The honorable Laurens can easily forego your company," returned the young man feeling strong and confident after his meal.

"And have you no request to make—one not couched in the terms of command?"

"You are pleased to be facetious," was the return.

"I have no request, but I have a direct command to make, and make it even while a prisoner."

"You are not euphemistic; say, rather, while you are an honored guest. Indeed, I have rarely taken so much trouble for anyone as I have for you."

"I will give you either more or less trouble in the immediate future," said Laurens, quickly getting to his feet and drawing the revolver. "Have done with your dramatic nonsense and set me at liberty at once. Show me the way from this house."

The Chinaman looked at the weapon without betraying the least emotion. "Occidental heroics!" he observed. As he spoke his cigar fell from his lips to the floor. "Pick it up and hand it to me," he commanded, without raising his voice.

"Go to hell!" was the vociferous rejoinder.

"So!" returned Chow T'su. "That was but a test. Your answer and your threatening attitude prove that your apology to me was but lip service! What would you do!" he asked, recovering his cigar and pacing it to his lips.

Laurens spoke with passion. "I will shoot you like the dog you are if within one minute you do not rise and show me out. I will shoot you if you are treacherous—if you dare call for help."

"Yes? You appear to be in earnest!"

"I am—in deadly earnest."

The Chinaman looked at him and deliberately clapped his thick, ring-bedecked hands. It was the last straw. Laurens instantly covered him with the revolver and pulled the trigger. But the only result was the snap of the falling hammer. Twice, thrice he cocked the weapon and attempted to shoot. And then he noticed the smile on the face of the undisturbed Celestial. For a moment his heart seemed to stop beating. In a frenzy he broke open the weapon and in an instant saw the cartridges were but dummies. With a burning face he flung the weapon from him and sank to his cushion just as the door opened and a young Celestial came in bearing the white wand of a *majordomo*. Laurens gave one look at him. "Mow-Sing!" he exclaimed.

The boy appeared not to have either seen or heard him and his face seemed as blank as a stone as he turned to Chow T'su. "You call?" he calmly inquired, as he bowed low.

"I did," was the return in English. "Show the honorable Laurens to his own apartments. He has become offensive."

CHAPTER XV

THE ABYSS

WITH his first sense of utter defeat Laurens was escorted back to his room. Most of the night was consumed in walking up and down like a caged animal. In the morning his breakfast was served by his dumb attendant and it was hardly completed when Chow T'su appeared. He came alone, but Laurens was perfectly aware that his guards were within instant call, and while he felt like flying at the man, he met him with a quietness that astonished himself, though his spirit was as yet unbroken.

"I am pleased to see that my guest has regained his mental balance," said the Chinaman. "His experience last evening showed he has little control over his passions; he also exposed his entire lack of penetration. Permit me to send a lesson home. Confucius says: 'He who fights should not wield a leaden sword.' "

"Curse your aphorisms!" began Laurens, but the other interrupted him.

"You are enthusiastic and dramatic. Allow me to finish. That revolver with which you threatened me was placed where I knew you would discover it. It was not like this." As he spoke he drew a small automatic pistol from his robe. "Had you really assaulted me I should have used this weapon, there being no command against self-defense. I am something of a student of human nature, sir; I am something of a mind reader and might qualify as a seer of some sort. I knew what it would be natural for you to attempt, and counted on your superficial examination of the revolver you were doubtless delighted to find. One of your weaknesses is that you are prone to jump at conclusions—you are too impetuous. I must correct this."

He spoke with exasperating good humor. Laurens was inwardly furious but he knew that to express his impotent rage would only please the Chinaman. With all the ease he could command he took a cigar from the humidor, lighted it and sat down. Chow T'su followed suit, rolling the havana between his coarse lips. After looking at his silent prisoner for a moment he asked: "Are you not satisfied here?"

"I am satisfied that you are an insatiable brute—

an inhuman monster," was the reply. "When is this going to end?"

"You may end it at any time, my friend."

"How?"

"I think I have left opium enough in the smoking room, but you would find the contents of the cabinet more speedy. Beside the lethal liquids there are razors—or perhaps you may prefer the rope. Forgive me for these details."

Laurens bounded to his feet. "You mean that you would drive me to suicide!"

"Nirvana, my friend," said Chow T'su, throwing back his head and sending a thin line of smoke toward the ceiling—"nirvana ends all troubles, even *feng-shuy*. Do you believe in *feng-shuy*? But of course, in your superior enlightenment, you do not." He spoke without the least emotion.

Laurens could not answer him; for the moment he was dumb from shock.

"*Feng-shuy*!" continued the Chinaman. "Ah, it is the spirit of ill luck! It hounds some men to their graves. Yes, it exists in your ultra-civilized country, often in the shape of poverty. You, John Laurens, are accounted rich. Did you ever lift *feng-shuy* from a human being? I'll warrant not! How many deaths lie at the door of the thousands you inherited

from your uncle! You are perhaps astonished that I know of your affairs. Let nothing astonish you; my arm is long. Did those dead men—men of the mines, the factory, the sea, ever wrong you or yours as you have wronged me? No. They died, sapped of means and spirit that you might prosper. Had you a live interest in them? No. You were passive. And I am passive.”

The quiet, even, unimpassioned tone of the man filled Laurens with horror. He was suddenly looking into a bottomless pit—the abyss of death. It was clear that the Chinaman was bent on no small revenge; he wished nothing less than the young man’s life, and was hounding him into taking it himself.

“So you are bent upon my killing myself!” he said, and spoke the words almost mechanically.

“I see the idea is new to you,” was the calm reply. “I was hoping it was not. Personally, I would not shed your blood, at present your pride being my great concern.” The Chinaman arose to his feet. “I have sworn to my ancestors to humble it, and failing in that the rest would be in vain. Your own taking off would prove that I had succeeded. Action, my friend; action and nothing less, for your apologies are worthless; you have already disproved

them. By the glory of Confucius, whom you deride, you have caused me to feel degraded, but now I hope soon to look my family in the face. I can hardly return to my native land until my soul is clean before my ancestors.

"I have been open with you. I will still be open. My household is large, though you have hardly glimpsed it; my men faithful. I lack for nothing I desire. In bodily comfort I suffer from nothing greater than the circumstance of your presence here. You alone alter my life. With you here I cannot enjoy the freedom I wish. I cannot enjoy my schooner which lies in the bay; I cannot enjoy my automobile journeys. It may interest you to know that this estate was purchased by me on speculation. I shall place it on sale at once and remain here only until your generosity sets me free to return to my own country. Sir, I wish but one look at your dead body, self slain, and promise you it shall not be defiled. As the French say—*voilà tout!*"

Laurens could only look at him. "Come, sir," said the Chinaman, "you have forced me to appear discourteous in being obliged to give you blunt facts, your comprehension not being set on a sharp edge. I will leave you to your own reflections." And he went from the room.

Laurens remained like one under a spell, but he could think. He saw it all now; the whole scheme had come to him with the suddenness and force of an explosion. The curse of the ivory ball had at last struck him. To the end of obtaining it and compelling his suicide he had been lured to that house, and he was horror-struck as he contemplated the future. The terrible silences, the solitude, the studied degradation and the confinement, together with a long and active sense of resentment would finally unbalance him, and there was no knowing what he might do then. Monotony has killed many men and his surroundings were not of the kind to stimulate hopeful imagination. The suffocating elegance of his apartment and the luxuries at his command tended to smother even that.

He looked after the departing monster but did not move for some time, then, like one bereft of his senses, he leaped up with the intention of doing something to bring Chow T'su back. He would throttle him at sight, let the consequences be what they might. He ran to the entrance and grasping the silver knobs shook them with all his force, when to his astonishment the door opened under his hand. And to his greater astonishment there was no guard outside. The hall was empty.

At this discovery his heart gave a great bound. It was evident that at the Chinaman's departure the fastening of the doors had been overlooked. No one was in sight and there was not a sound to alarm him, but that the guard had but recently left was shown by the still smoking cigarette stump in the earthen tray on the floor.

A sudden sense of exultation sent the blood surging through Laurens' veins, and his nearness to liberty was like a choking hand taken from his throat. Instantly his nerves quieted, but he realized that he was far from being out of the lion's den; the guard might return at any moment. To make a blind dash without knowing where he was going would be worse than useless, but it behooved him to get to some cover and lay out a line of action.

Not daring to go back to his now hateful room for fear of being locked in, he quietly closed the door and hurrying across the wide hall opened the door of the nearest room, or that directly opposite his own. It let him into a great gilded salon absolutely barren of furniture of any kind and lighted only by slits in the closed shutters of the tall French windows. The crystal chandeliers, brackets and wall mirrors were swathed in white and the polished floor was thick with the dust of months.

Laurens discovered that the windows could not be opened and so went back to the door. The hall was still empty and he sped over the marble floor, his felt soles making no noise, trying other doors as he went, but they were fastened. He was becoming hopeless when upon trying the last door in the corridor he found that it opened into familiar quarters; it was the room in which he had dined with Chow T'su the night before.

But now there was no table set for a meal and the character of the place had changed; the decorative palms had been removed, the heavy curtains drawn away from the wide window, which was open, and a large desk and several chairs had been introduced, giving the apartment the effect of a plainly furnished office. Like the hall it was empty of mankind.

Laurens ran to the window only to see that it might as well have been barred for all the good it would do him; for it opened upon a small, closed court, or well, around which arose the window-pierced walls of the mansion which he saw could be hardly less than a palace in size and appearance, and the distance to the concrete pavement was something more than twenty feet. Even in his desperate state he recoiled against such a drop, but his

disappointment was not as keen as it might have been, for there was the telephone on the stand which he had noticed the night before. It was the key that would open his prison.

With nervous haste he grasped the instrument and, snatching the receiver from its hook, placed it to his ear, but instead of the indefinite buzzing caused by electrical induction, showing the wire to be "alive," there was no sound at all and no response came from the central station, though he worked the lever for fully five minutes. The thing appeared to be as dead as Cæsar and as useless. He was about to throw it down in despair when, like music from heaven, there came a click and the sound of a man's voice.

"Hello! What is it?"

"For God's sake send for the police!" returned Laurens, his nerves tingling. "I am imprisoned in a house!"

"Imprisoned! In what house?"

"I don't know where I am. I think the place is in the suburbs."

"What number is your phone?"

"It has none that I can see. Ah! Connect me with the Palace Hotel."

"The Palace Hotel!" came back the voice. "Where do you think you are?"

"Somewhere near San Francisco. I was drugged and——"

The interruption came sharp and quick. "Your keeper had better have an eye on you! This office is in Sacramento." The words were followed by a chuckling laugh which Laurens plainly heard. After that came the click of a hook and the wire passed into its old condition of deadness.

Laurens was frantic, too frantic to recognize that the speaker at the other end of the line was entirely different in manner from the trained employe of the telephone company—that it could not have been a central office which had answered him. And he was in Sacramento! If so he had been insane or was insane now. Certainly, at that moment he was far from being well balanced.

With a groan he slammed the instrument to the floor and in desperation strode to the door and flung it open. They might do with him as they would; he could no longer help himself, and for one single instant he thought of settling the whole business by going back and satisfying the murderous Chinaman. He could no longer stand the strain.

But this was but a momentary weakness and a

sight of the still empty hall changed his thoughts, though it did not cause him to be more cautious. In his new mood of carelessness and anger he moved up the hall, passed the ancestral record on its easel, passed his own door, and so on until he came to a broad, marble-stepped, bronze-railed stairway leading upward. He was about to take to it without knowing why, when he suddenly saw his way to freedom as he noticed that to his right, and just beyond the flight of stairs, was a short but broad passage at the end of which was a heavy glass door guarded by a bronze grill. It was the main entrance to the mansion; the door stood half open, and through the space came the rippling purr of an automobile engine in action.

The sight of this egress brought a new and sudden hope, and gathering up his robe Laurens ran to it. A limousine with its curtains drawn and its door flung wide stood in a covered court as though waiting for someone, and at the end of the court was an intricately patterned wrought-iron gate. It, also, was open, as the whole place appeared to be, and a Chinese attendant stood by it, his back toward Laurens.

The young man halted and took observation. Beyond the gate were the trees of a park and

through them he caught sight of the glass roof of a conservatory. Beneath the trees the lawn was green, and over all was a sky as blue as the waters of Lake Como. The air was loaded with the odor of flowers and the scent came to him like a breath from Elysium. From some distant steeple there sounded the musical beat of a bell striking the hour of eleven. It was all entrancing to the eye and ear. Never had the outside world appeared so wondrously beautiful.

Laurens thrilled, but his gaze did not remain on what lay beyond the gate; it fell to the man standing by it and to the driver at the wheel of the waiting machine. In the latter he thought he recognized the stolid chauffeur who had driven him from Calamere's to his prison. Like a hound pointing his prey he looked from the open door and saw freedom save for the stiff attendant and the motionless chauffeur. Should he make a dash for liberty and risk all? But to where? Here was a mansion in an extensive private park, but Laurens had no idea of the direction of the public street, while to follow the broad driveway would be foolish; he would be overtaken in a minute, and to make a fight of it would be useless; he had no weapon, and in his

weakened state would be no match for either of the robust men before him.

Though he knew that mere muscle would not accomplish his liberty he was not entirely hopeless, though by then he was shaking from fear of discovery and excitement. Knowing that each moment he remained at the door lessened his chances he acted at once, his actions being almost automatic and based on the fact that the driver of the automobile was expecting someone and that the door of the machine stood wide open. Without an instant of further hesitation he drew himself up and without hurry walked down the marble steps and entered the limousine. No one appeared to have noticed him and his only self-put question was: Had the chauffeur been given his directions? or would he turn for instructions and recognize him? He was in for it whatever happened, and, pulling the door smartly after him, as a signal to start, he dropped into the back seat.

The automobile did not move but the fact was lost on the young man; for as he fell back on to the yielding cushion he found he was not alone; the drawn curtains of the machine had concealed an occupant.

CHAPTER XVI

HUMILIATION

IT was Chow T'su. If the Chinaman was angry he was far from showing it, for he only smiled as he looked into the appalled face of his victim. "I was becoming a trifle impatient," he remarked as casually as if Laurens had been a friend for whom he had been waiting. "I really thought you would have arrived sooner."

Laurens stared at him. "You—you expected me!"

"Absolutely. I was certain you would do what you did. You are no enigma, my friend, and, as I have before intimated, I am familiar with human nature. Let me add that I have little respect for it, as being guided by selfish interest. All men are selfish; I am selfish, but, unlike you, I am broad enough to recognize the fact and so have a touchstone to the actions of others. It is very simple, is it not? Come, you wish to ride? You shall."

He picked up the dangling speaking-tube and spoke a few words in Chinese. The limousine sprang into life and swept out of the court, the standing attendant bowing low.

To Laurens the turn of the tables had been complete, and his sudden hope so quickly dashed that he was too crushed to make a return to the tyrant at his side who, with affected deference, offered him a cigarette. It was waved away. For one moment the young man thought of the desperate expedient of throwing himself on the fat villain but had sense enough to know that he was too nerveless to succeed even if the man had not provided against attack. There was but one recourse left: When the limousine reached the highway he would dash open the door and leap out, risking broken bones; he would scream or otherwise attract attention, and so, without wasting words on the unctuous Chinaman, he waited, believing that he would not have to wait long.

Through the park swept the elegant vehicle; down an avenue of limes, past the conservatory, past a trim lawn on which two men were working, past a small grove of eucalyptus trees, past beds of roses, past a miniature lake, and along a high, dressed stone wall, draped with vines, which marked the con-

finest of a magnificent estate. At length the vehicle swept toward a lodge by a gateway in the wall at which stood another Chinaman. It was closed, and instead of waiting for it to be opened the machine turned sharply and entered an intersecting driveway, the attendant at the gate bowing as it passed. A moment later it stopped in front of a large, low building of white stone.

At once the door was thrown open by another bowing Chinaman and Chow T'su stepped out. During the ride of five minutes he had not spoken a word; now he held out his hand and invited Laurens to descend.

More like a child than an adult the young man obeyed and marked that the limousine had halted before what was plainly a garage. He had been again fooled and was too heartbroken to more than look around hopelessly, being conscious that there were several Orientals about the place. There was no animosity in Chow T'su's attitude as he took Laurens by the arm and led him along a narrow, flower-bordered path at the end of which rose the white walls of the mansion. As if in the grasp of a snake the young man jerked his arm away. "Your pleasure comes through my humiliation, you villain!" he said.

"You mean you do not relish the lesson I set myself to teach you—that of humility—the humility you once witnessed in me," was the return. "I trust that before you are ready to enter your impossible Christian heaven you will have been reformed in that respect. And you are not analytical. I will prove it. You found your door open and your guard absent?"

"I did. I now know why."

"Admirable! You are becoming enlightened! Of course it was by my orders; you should have suspected that at once. Were I in your place I would have known."

Laurens bit his lip.

"And you received but little satisfaction from the telephone, I judge. You lost time in finding it, though I thought I made it sufficiently conspicuous last evening. I knew you would go to it. Again, selfish human nature!"

Laurens felt like a school-boy under the lash of a master's tongue. The Chinaman went on: "And you had a short conversation with my secretary, who could see you plainly; for that purpose the curtains were drawn back and the window left open. He will enjoy giving me the details. Allow me to add

that the instrument is not connected with a station; it is for domestic use only."

He spoke in a voice as smooth, silky and free from anger as though the man at his side was his best friend, but Laurens recognized his malicious joy as he showed how the play had been staged for his discomfort and disappointment. His wrath against the Chinaman was almost an insane passion; he could have killed him without the least compunction, and even looked around for some weapon of offense, but with devilish ingenuity Chow T'su seemed to read his thoughts.

"Being impossible of success, were I you I would not even attempt it, sir," he said, without in the least altering his colloquial tone. "Ours is a war of wits; if your brains get the better of mine I will be forced to surrender. I have used no violence on you and your desire to use it on me is always provided for. Look behind you, sir."

Laurens turned his head. A few yards in his rear, and following, were the two stalwart men Chow T'su had summoned to his side once before. "Come, sir," said the Chinaman, "let us return to your apartments."

Laurens' whole soul rose in revolt against going back to his luxurious hell. He stopped and faced his

jailer. "Chow T'su," he said, trying to check the tremor in his voice, "have you no mercy? Have you not punished me enough? You have won. I have confessed my fault and apologized. I have had my lesson."

"This is better!" blandly returned the Chinaman. "You are improving under my guidance. But Confucius says: 'Some study—some correction—usually shows the need of more.' Do you think that it is I who cry for revenge? You know me but little, if you do. Your curses of me were as nothing. But my ancestors—appeal to them; when they forgive and send a sign I will open my hand."

"You mean to press me to—to the end you mentioned?"

"You are rapidly becoming prepared for it," was the cryptic answer. "I shall endeavor to be patient. Come!"

"What if I refuse to move from here?"

"You are not quite a fool, I trust. You would not be roughly used but you would be carried to where you must go. And consider your loss of dignity; consider the scene before my servants! A Chinaman of caste would never confess failure; he might fall but he would save his face before the world. Death is not disgrace!"

"I shall beg no more," was the rejoinder.

There was nothing for Laurens to do but submit, and submit he did. Ten minutes later he was alone in his hateful prison. He threw himself on the bed in the depths of mingled rage and despair.

CHAPTER XVII

SEVEN DAYS

THAT day passed as did the next and the next until a week went by, and no one came near him save the single silent attendant who served his meals and glided ghost-like about the rooms, setting them in order. The monotony of the hours was terrible and Laurens knew he would go mad if he passed them in introspection. At times the awfulness of his situation came upon him with overwhelming force, then he would fall into a dull apathy as his mind reacted from the strain. That he was always guarded he was perfectly aware.

He suffered no lack of physical comfort but mentally, consciously and unconsciously, he was agonized. To save his sanity he would seat himself at the piano and play for hours, and he was no mean performer for one without practice. He smoked innumerable cigars, drank moderately, but began to eat less and sleep less. His confinement was injur-

ing his health, and he knew it. He read the English books in the bookcase, especially a translation of Confucius, and its correct moral teaching and cold philosophy maddened him though many of the aphorisms burned into his brain and remained there. He attempted to engage in conversation with his silent servant, but the man would not second his efforts even when he openly tried to bribe him to help gain his liberty or carry a note to Miss Dalzell. Was she still in the house? He did not know, but when the terrible stillness grew unbearable, as it often did, he would go to the piano and play to her hoping that the sound would reach her and she would understand. At all events, the piano was occupation for his brain and hands and undoubtedly it saved him from madness and self-destruction.

On the seventh day of his imprisonment he was improvising at the instrument when on turning away from it he found Chow T'su standing in the middle of the room.

"You are quite a genius!" said the Chinaman, smiling and speaking as if he had seen him only the hour before. "And you are a trifle thinner; you do not look as well as you did. I do not wish you to fail physically and think you would be better for a little relaxation."

Laurens glared at him.

"I would not have your few remaining days made too hard," continued Chow T'su. "That would be poor hospitality—even as poor as was yours to me when you practically ordered me to die in the desert. I have been most liberal toward you but will offer to place you under further obligations. Would you like to see Miss Dalzell?"

Laurens fairly leaped from the piano-stool. "Is she still here? Is she well?"

"Absolutely and remarkably."

"You will really take me to her?" Laurens' eagerness was unconcealed.

"I congratulate the lady on the warmth of her lover," responded Chow T'su, with a slight frown. "I also commiserate her as she will never know your embrace. However, you shall dine with her."

"Dine with her and speak to her?" excitedly asked Laurens.

"With restrictions, yes. But you will say no word to her derogatory to me. You will ask for no explanation of her being in this house, nor will you even remotely hint that your treatment has been anything but delightful. In short, you will contradict me in nothing I say in her presence. You will give no tongue to your affection, but, as for that, I do

not think you would wish to. And last, you will substantiate any statement I may make. If you fail in these conditions it will be at Miss Dalzell's peril." The Chinaman's voice had taken on a harsh tone.

"I don't think I understand," returned Laurens.

"But you agree?"

"Are you preparing some fresh humiliation or disappointment?"

"Humiliation at seeing the lady you love? You astonish me. I said you should see her, dine with her, talk with her, but unless you agree to the conditions the offer is withdrawn, and if you break them you will have the pleasant reflection of having made the lady suffer. Are you agreeable?"

"The conditions are monstrous, but I will meet them. I must."

"Confucius says: 'One must bend his head when the eaves are low.' I will take your honorable word. But, my friend, your robe has grown shabby. I shall return you your own clothing; as the dinner is for this evening they will be appropriate. I will call for you promptly at six. In the meantime you will probably be interested to reflect on the stir you have made in the world."

He took from his voluminous sleeve a folded newspaper and handing it to Laurens, bowed himself

from the room. The young man opened the journal at once. It was a San Francisco daily dated the day before and he did not have to search for the matter in question, the broad stripe of Chinese ink marking the item.

“Nothing has been heard from John Laurens, formerly a lieutenant in the U. S. Navy, and Miss Josephine Dalzell, daughter of the late Colonel Dalzell, of the U. S. Army, who eloped a week ago. They were last seen at Callamere’s exclusive restaurant. The elopement is clouded in mystery as it is understood that the two had known each other for but a few days. Mr. Laurens’ friend, Professor Woodstock, now at the Palace Hotel, and lately returned from China, scoffs at the idea of an elopement. He maintains that on the date of the couple’s disappearance Mr. Laurens was out of town. He knows little of Miss Dalzell excepting her name, and strongly hints at some foul play about which he will say nothing at present!”

Laurens laid down the paper and his tense nerves relaxed, for he saw one gleam of hope. Woodstock was suspicious of foul play, and knowing his energy the young man knew he would leave no stone unturned in order to get at the bottom of the mystery.

The newspaper and his hope of seeing Josephine that evening put life into him—a life he had not felt for days. He now looked at conditions under a new stimulus. Suicide? He? Never! Rather he

would waste away in confinement, dying of a broken heart, but while sane he would not lift his hand against himself for the satisfaction of Chow T'su. He lacked the Eastern idea of "saving his face," and to him it was perfectly clear that the Chinaman wished him to kill himself in order to save his own, and that while he lived he had the fanatical Celestial at a disadvantage.

With a fillip to his spirits he set about preparing for the evening, determined to outwit his jailer. At four o'clock his clothing came. It had been newly pressed, his linen freshly laundered and his patent leather shoes cleaned. By signs the dumb attendant offered to help him dress but Laurens abruptly dismissed him and dressed himself, not wishing a witness to his actions. At five o'clock he felt civilized; he was ready. At six Chow T'su appeared, being robed in the gorgeous gown of his rank, and with him came Mow-Sing, bearing the white wand of a *majordomo*. The boy looked very serious and he would not allow his eyes to meet those of his old master.

"You are quite a handsome man and really a credit to your order," said Chow T'su, looking Laurens over in the enigmatical manner of the Oriental. "Of course my honorable friend will remember my

instructions to him—I mean my suggestions, for one does not instruct a guest,” he went on. “And as we will appear to be on the best of terms he will condescend to permit himself to take my arm as we enter Miss Dalzell’s presence. Do you agree? A refusal might imperil the lady.”

“I am ready to follow you,” was the return.

“And obey? Of a surety! But first, before we leave this room, the honorable Laurens will give me the note he has written and hoped to pass to his inamorata.”

The Chinaman smiled and held out his hand. Laurens’ face suddenly flamed. The man was a mind-reading devil. “How—how——”

“How did I know? I did not know, my friend, but I do now. I merely surmised that you would attempt to do a most natural thing. Remember my knowledge of human nature. The note, if you please.”

Laurens took the paper from his immaculate cuff and threw it to the floor. Mow-Sing picked it up and presented it, kneeling. The fat Chinaman calmly opened it and read aloud:

“I have been a prisoner since the night we came here, made so by the devil who poses to you as my friend but who wishes my death. Believe nothing he

tells you of me. I am obliged to play a part in order to protect you. When possible notify the police or get word to Professor Paul Woodstock at the Palace Hotel."

"So!" said the Chinaman, tearing the paper into small bits and scattering them on the floor. "You choose to defy me!"

"I have the right of self-defense," Laurens returned. "Even you will not deny that."

"Sir, your act was constructive disobedience. You agreed to my wishes. See how your honor totters under selfish interest! Come, sir! I will at once free Miss Dalzell and sail for China on my yacht—on one condition."

"What condition?"

"That you show your unselfish devotion to the lady by going to the cabinet and mixing yourself a lethal cocktail. In wine I will drink to your health—I mean, to your passage over the Styx. The lady shall never know."

If for a moment Laurens thought of consenting—if he was tempted to make an end of it all—it was not because of any heroic sentiment for the girl but for the reason that he became suddenly hopeless. Had he not hated the purring Chinaman so deeply he might have fallen during his temporary weak-

ness, but the weakness passed. He forced a laugh. "I have no faith in your word," he returned. "You have acknowledged your own selfishness and admitted that you were not above lying. I must refuse to give you satisfaction." Chow T'su threw out his arms in a gesture of disappointment. "I regret your decision, sir—as you will regret it, later. Come! we will now go to the lady." He led the way from the room, Mow-Sing behind him.

Past the kow-towing guards they went, up the bronze-railed marble stairway and into a broad upper hall at the end of which a leaded oriel window splashed the bare wall with a confusion of rich colors as the setting sun shot through its stained glass. Coming to a door Chow T'su stopped and presented his arm, giving his captive a significant glance. Laurens laid his hand in it; Mow-Sing threw open the door and the trio entered.

CHAPTER XVIII

MY LADY'S CHAMBER

THE apartment was large and entirely different from the one Laurens had just left in that it was almost entirely furnished in Western style and had but few Oriental touches. That it was a part of a magnificent suite was evident from the many doors leading from it. Though not yet evening the heavy draperies of the windows were already drawn together and the place made brilliant by electric lights. A modern table elaborately furnished with glass and silver was set at one side of the room, and opposite was a deep couch. On it reclined Miss Dalzell dressed in Oriental costume, and by her was a Chinese girl waving a long-handled fan. The lady might have been a Cleopatra attended by a slave, and a recollection of a similar picture came to Laurens' mind as he recognized the woman he loved.

Dropping the Chinaman's arm he stepped forward. As the girl saw him she started up with an

exclamation of astonishment, but Chow T'su interposed before she could speak.

"This, madam, is the little surprise at which I hinted," he said unctuously, as he bowed. The lady's face flushed as she half rose, and for an instant Laurens thought she would cry out; but she did not; she merely extended her hand. He took it. Her fingers were like ice and he was tempted to raise them to his lips but thought of Chow T'su's warning in time. That she was unlike her own self came as a painful shock to the young man, though to him she was still a flower of beauty which was in no way lessened in effectiveness by the gorgeous robe she wore. Her hair had been put up in Chinese fashion, but even that hideous style seemed to be becoming. But there was little to assure her lover of her pleasure in seeing him. She looked at him with an air of constraint.

"Mr. Laurens is welcome," she said, withdrawing her hand from his and sinking back to her former position. "He has been very long in coming."

There was an indifference about her that puzzled the young man, in the face of what he had looked for, and her reference to him in the third person rather stung his pride. Chow T'su prevented his making a return. "I have prevailed on the honor-

able Laurens to do his duty," said the Chinaman. "I found him in a luxurious apartment—I will not say whose. He admits he has been deficient in attention to his old friend, and at my earnest desire he has come to see her. He will remain my guest for a few days."

"He is very kind, I am sure," was the perfunctory return.

"Permit me to add," said the smiling Celestial, "that Mr. Laurens and I are no longer enemies. We comprehend each other perfectly, and he has apologized and made amends for our recent misunderstanding. As you are aware, our point of difference lay in the possession of a certain *ojimi*, or ivory ball. He admits my right to it and has given it to me without reservation."

"Yes?" returned the young lady, as if the matter was of small importance.

Laurens dared not give the lie to the smooth villain, who smiled as he spoke. He could not allow his passion to jeopardize the frail girl who, for all he knew, was acting a part under compulsion. "Miss Dalzell has been ill?" he said, finding his voice.

"Very ill," she returned, looking fixedly at him.

"So ill," put in Chow T'su, "that it has been thought inadvisable to move her to her friend's, who

is content to have her remain here until her health is fully restored. She has every attention and is guarded from all harm. Come—it is late! Permit me, mademoiselle.”

He approached the couch and offered his arm; the girl's pale face flushed but she arose, took the proffered arm and was escorted to the table, walking like one to whom exertion was an effort. In a moment they were seated.

An awkward silence followed and to Laurens' surprise it was Miss Dalzell who finally broke it. “I—I trust you will enjoy your stay in—in Menlo Park, Mr. Laurens.”

The name caught him. At last he could locate himself. “Thank you,” he returned. “I—I expect to have the time of my life.”

“It is but the prelude to a long journey, he informs me,” remarked Chow T'su, as the dinner was being served.

“Yes!” returned the girl, with her first show of interest. “And to where?”

“I—I have not yet settled that point,” answered Laurens, inwardly cursing his grinning host.

“He will not be definite even with such a good friend as I,” said the Chinaman, rubbing his fat hands together.

"No?" Then with a palpable effort the girl continued: "Is this not a strange meeting after a stranger parting! What a turn in the wheel of circumstance. Once our friend was my servant; now I am indebted to him for everything—even life."

"And happiness, I hope," interrupted the Oriental, his grin suddenly vanishing. "Such changes are not uncommon," he went on. "Once Mr. Laurens was arrogant; once he assaulted me, mistakenly, as he admits; now he is my honored guest. I owe him much."

Laurens made no return, being dumb with rage against Chow T'su and fearful that the girl would be made to suffer if he disobeyed the Chinaman's commands. It was more than evident that he had been brought into the presence of Miss Dalzell as much for the purpose of making him suffer as for anything he could determine. It was simply another mode of humiliating him. His intention of explaining his position to the woman whom he had little doubt was a captive like himself had been frustrated by his own blunder in unthinkingly admitting having written a note. He could not be open, but it might be possible to convey the situation to the unhappy Josephine, if she were bright enough to understand, and he had no doubt of her mental acumen. He

hoped for an opportunity, and it came rather sooner than he anticipated.

The courses were served mostly in silence—a silence Chow T'su did not seem to relish. "We appear to be rather lacking in interesting topics," he finally remarked. The girl laughed lightly and Laurens knew it was a forced effort for it was evident that her nerves were at high tension; her eyes had grown bright and there was again a trace of color on her usually pale cheeks. "It is more than strange," she returned, as if reverting to the former conversation, "that one is often deceived by appearances unless one is forever probing for its cause. Mr. Laurens, for instance, hardly realizes the nature and extent of your hospitality to me. He doubtless thinks——"

"Mademoiselle, he thinks profoundly," interrupted Chow T'su, swinging toward her as if in warning.

Laurens understood. If the girl had told him the bald facts in bald language they could not have been plainer. It was his chance. In his turn he would explain that he was in a false position. "Indeed our host is right," he remarked lightly. "I have thought profoundly and have arrived at the conclusion that appearances, like circumstantial evidence, are not to

be relied upon. It is only the superficial mind that gives snap judgment. For instance, to be personal, I am known to be wealthy. I am supposed to be free and independent, and to those ignorant of conditions I am perhaps envied. Let me assure you that the facts are otherwise. I am far from happy and my money avails me little in the face of bitter disappointment. Even the lavishness of my host's attentions give me but slight relief. It may be a poor compliment to him, but even here and surrounded by the luxury he so generously furnishes I have to admit suffering from intolerable *ennui*. Is that not your own experience, your Highness?" he asked blandly, turning to the Chinaman. "Have you not permitted disappointment to alter your life and affect your happiness?"

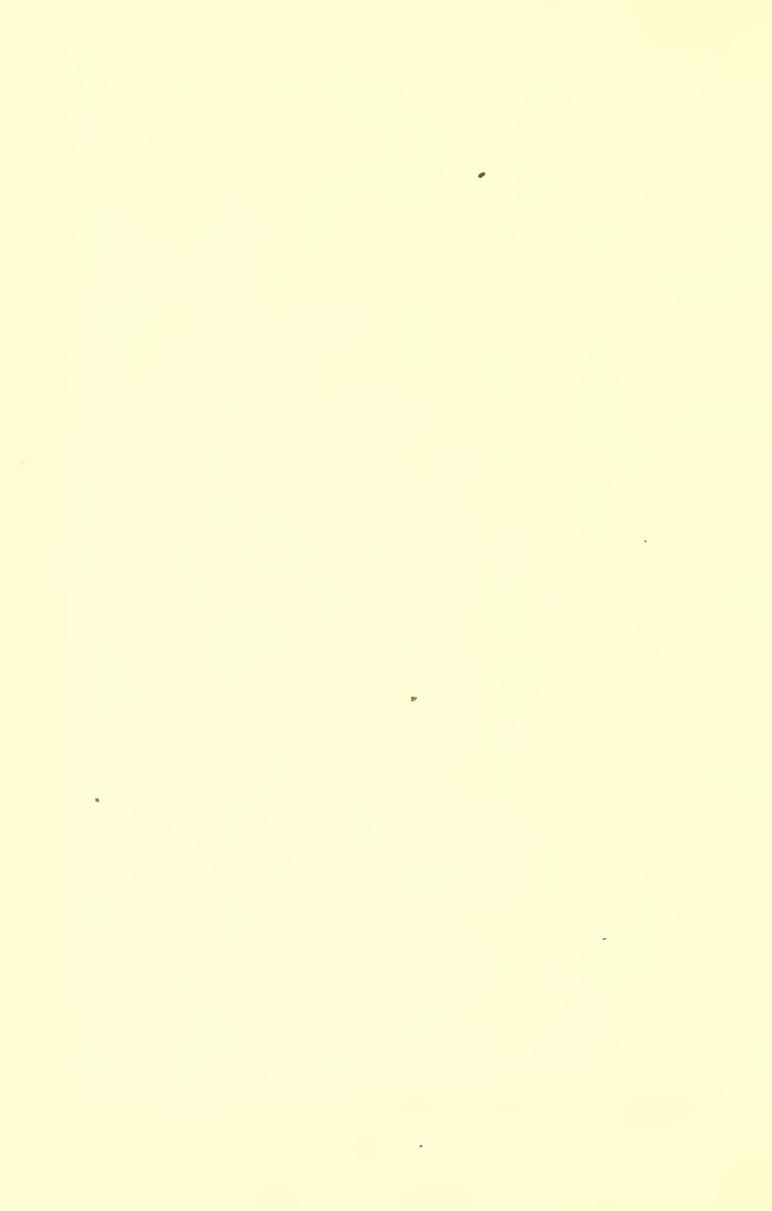
"Yes," returned the mandarin, darting a malignant look at his smiling guest. "I have known disappointment, but I rise superior to it. And I usually know how to punish those who cause it."

"I am not so fortunate," said Miss Dalzell. "Under disappointment one's character should strengthen, but—but you must remember the adage: 'Hope deferred maketh the heart sick.'"

"I would draw Mr. Laurens' attention to one by the great Confucius," said the Chinaman, mean-



"Madam," broke in Chow T'su, "remember that you have been warned against this excitement"



ingly. "It is to the effect that when in a morass one should keep closely to the path. Disappointment in itself is a slight thing. It is the result that smarts. And one often brings the result on himself."

"God knows it smarts!" returned the young lady, speaking with sudden animation. "But much can be saved by bravely meeting a reverse. That is trite. Mr. Laurens, once you saved me, and——"

"Mademoiselle," broke in Chow T'su, "remember that you have been warned against this—excitement."

The girl seemed to shrink like a corrected child. The Chinaman turned to speak to an attendant, and taking advantage of the moment Laurens laid a finger on his lip. He saw that she understood, and he was satisfied.

Thereafter the dinner progressed without the light conversation approaching dangerous ground, and it was just as dessert was concluded that the door opened and Mow-Sing entered. Going up to his master he dropped on one knee, presented a roll of paper wrapped in silk, and spoke a few words in Chinese. Chow T'su appeared interested; he took off the silk and flung open the roll which Laurens could see was covered with Chinese characters. As the mandarin read he noticed him catch his thick

under-lip with his yellow teeth, but whatever it was that troubled him it did not throw him off his poise.

"So!" he said, in his usual calm voice. "It is unfortunate to be obliged to obtrude business at such a time, but it may interest my guests to know that in this my agent informs me that this house, which has been in the market, was contracted for and sold yesterday. It is still more unfortunate that I must give almost immediate possession."

Was this part of a stage effect? Laurens wondered; but before he could come to a solution of what it might mean Miss Dalzell started from her chair, a look of absolute consternation on her face. "Where will you go?" she cried.

"Mademoiselle," returned Chow T'su softly. "You know my plans."

The effect of his words amazed the young man. Slowly the girl got to her feet as if she had lost sight of her surroundings and was looking at a vision, her eyes becoming vacant. Throwing out her arms in a gesture of despair she moaned: "Oh, my God!" and pitched to the floor.

Laurens jumped to lift her, his heart suddenly racing, but Chow T'su laid a hand on his arm. "Not you," he said.

"Go to the devil!" shouted the young man, shak-

ing him off and carrying the lax body to the couch. The Chinaman clapped his hands and at the sound the door was thrown open and the two guards appeared. The Chinaman spoke rapidly in his own language and without warning Laurens was seized and carried struggling from the room. Before he could regain his wits he found himself in his old apartment.

CHAPTER XIX

AN ULTIMATUM

RAGE is not the proper word to describe Laurens' state of mind, but gradually he gained a measure of self-control and finally noticed a thing he had not marked in the wildness of his raving. During his absence someone had been busy. The lights had been turned on and the black rope he had seen in the cabinet was now suspended from a bar in the skylight, its noose dangling a few feet above the chair which had been placed beneath it. It was a gruesome looking thing, but its sinister suggestion changed the young man's thoughts and he almost laughed at the puerility of his jailer. Then he became alive to the fact that the curtains concealing the entrance to the little dining-room had been drawn back as if in invitation to enter. Curiosity moving him he went in, only to receive a shock as he discovered a coffin on trestles where the table had been, and that it was to act as a table was shown by the way its end was spread with the furnishings

usual to his meals. The coffin was empty, its head-board resting against it.

Laurens stared at the thing and his wrath rose to the height of insanity. With a wild yell he ran to it and kicked it from its supports. No one entered at the sound of the crash, and taking out his pocket knife he slashed the somber covering into strips and scattered them around. His very violence relieved him, but his despair was unfathomable, the refinement of Chow T'su's cruelty showing his determination. He had gained nothing by seeing Josephine, unless it was a knowledge of the location of his prison and the fact that she understood his situation. He had been beaten at all points that were essential and there was but one end in sight. He returned to the main room and sat down with his back to the dangling noose, trying to forget it.

But he could not forget it; the thing haunted him and he suddenly swung around and faced it as though it were a serpent against which he must guard himself. He tried to read but his book might as well have been upside down. He flung it across the room and settled himself to face the thing he could no longer ignore. But its fascination grew with the minutes. He spoke to it as to a sentient being which understood and which forever invited

him. He cursed it, then pleaded to it, then spoke words of terror, but always there was a silent appeal in the black line, a horrid suggestion which the man was in no condition to cast aside. He no longer laughed at it.

Laurens was becoming self-hypnotized. Mentally he saw himself slowly swinging at its end, a heavy pendulum marking the seconds of eternity. The horror of it seemed to attract him. Like the altitude fascination, which compels some men to jump from high places, the black rope drew him as a magnet draws a bit of steel.

And he almost succumbed to the lure of his morbid imagination. Like one walking in his sleep he threw off his coat and got to the top of the chair. He even placed the noose about his neck and in a moment more would have kicked away his support had there not come to him two visions; one of the helpless girl, the other the smiling face of Chow T'su as he looked at his swinging corpse.

They broke the spell. With a sudden horror of what he was about to do Laurens ripped out a saving curse at his own weakness, flung the noose from his neck, and with his knife cut the rope as far up as he could reach; then jumping to the floor he grasped the chair, rushed into the adjoining

room, and with his late support as a club he made a wreck of both chair and coffin.

That done he suddenly calmed; his energy had spent itself. He threw himself on his bed and almost instantly fell asleep from pure nervous exhaustion.

Three days passed and no one came but his old attendant who removed the débris from the dining-room as if splintered coffins and broken chairs were matters of daily occurrence. But on the fourth day, when he was walking the floor for exercise, and smoking, Chow T'su unexpectedly appeared, followed by Mow-Sing bearing his usual badge of office. The mandarin's voice was hardly as bland as usual; there was a slight ring of irritation in it, but his manner was not harsh.

"I would have your attention, sir," he said, as Laurens continued his walk without appearing to have noticed him.

"Well," returned the young man, halting and facing the Chinaman.

"Sir," said Chow T'su, "certain of those interested in you have become greatly agitated at your unaccountable absence from your home and club and have been taking steps to find you. Your friend Woodstock has coupled your disappearance with a

certain ivory ball and the sudden resignation of his servant, and he has called upon the police for aid. Do you imagine, my friend, that you may have hopes or that I have fears? I have known these things for several days and said nothing, but the expected sale of this house has put a climax to matters. I trust that you appreciate my openness."

"What hellish scheme are you concocting now?" demanded Laurens.

"Your language is more clear than elegant!" was the return, "and to equal its clearness I will say that you have six more days to meet my wishes. I see you have ignored my late suggestion," he went on, glancing at the shortened rope yet hanging from the skylight. "I will only say that at the end of six days I shall be obliged to make a change regarding you, if you persist in existing."

"You mean you would murder me?"

"No," was the reply in the same even voice. "I might fairly argue that the command on the outraged Eye of God does not apply to your punishment for cursing my sacred ancestors, but I prefer to be on the safe side. However, your final disposition will be effectual. You will die. I will add——"

What he would have added Laurens did not then

learn for at that moment Mow-Sing stepped in front of the mandarin, dropped to his knees, and with upturned face and outstretched hands spoke in Chinese, the sing-song words pouring from him in a rapid stream.

The mandarin appeared to be wonder-struck and as he listened his eyes took on an expression Laurens had never seen. With a sudden exclamation he strode forward and struck the kneeling boy a violent blow on the side of the head, the force of it sending the youth into the wall hangings where he lay half stunned. Stooping for the white wand of office the Chinaman broke it into pieces and flung the fragments at his prostrate kinsman; then he clapped his hands. Instantly the well-known guards appeared and as Chow T'su thundered something in his own language the fellows picked Mow-Sing from the floor and carried him from the room. Not a word did the outraged boy utter; not a whimper came from him though blood was freely flowing from a cut in his temple.

"You are a coward as well as a brute!" exclaimed Laurens, as the door closed.

"Sir," said the Chinaman, his voice now trembling with anger, "he had the temerity to plead for you, as if my will was to be questioned."

"God bless him for it! I have been doing him the injustice of thinking him one of your familiars," returned the young man.

"He knew the probable cost of his daring, sir. Everyone does, who knows me. Even you, stubborn as you are, will finally bend low before me."

"I have more respect for the Miltonic Satan than for you, you swine!" was the defiant rejoinder. "Bow to your will! By heaven! you may kill me but you will never force me to that."

The Chinaman looked at him, his heavy face lowering, then without another word he turned abruptly and marched out.

CHAPTER XX

FROM THE FRYING-PAN

“SIX days more of this terrible existence, and then the end!” thought Laurens, as he went on pacing the floor. “Some change, at least, and almost any will be welcome.” He wondered what would become of Josephine, and if she was being punished because he carried her to the lounge; but everything pertaining to her was conjectural.

Four of the six days passed without the slightest alteration to his monotonous life, but on the fifth day things began to happen. A gang of Chinese workmen entered the room and commenced dismantling it; when they had finished nothing was left of former luxuries of the apartments; in fact little of anything was left save the bare, undraped walls scored with nail holes, a single chair, the bed, cleared of its hangings, a box of cigars and a bottle of wine. All else had gone, even to the screens that divided the rooms.

The great change was a relief to Laurens. He had grown to hate everything Chinese, from his persecutor to the least article of Oriental manufacture. Even the air seemed easier to breathe. But it had become a barn of a prison, and the electricity having been cut off it became pitchy dark soon after sunset, the only remaining gleam being that from a fixed star Laurens could see through the open skylight. It was no star of hope to him. That he was about to be moved or murdered he was sure, and either event would obliterate Woodstock's chance of tracing him. Laurens' idea was that he would be taken to some gloomy hole in or near San Francisco where harsh treatment and close confinement would do the work he refused to do.

The fateful sixth day arrived but nothing happened until evening and by then the young man had become hardened to his fate and looked at it as a criminal looks at his coming execution. As the skylight darkened Chow T'su appeared followed by three men, one bearing a lighted lamp, another a large cloak.

"You have again disappointed me," said the mandarin, though he did not appear angry. "I have to inform you that the time has come."

"For what?" returned Laurens, bracing himself

and determined that if it were to come to murder he would die fighting.

"For your removal, sir. You need not take a truculent attitude; there will be no force used unless you resist. You will put on this coat and accompany me."

"To be murdered?"

"By no means, sir. Had I contemplated that I could have accomplished it long ago. This house is emptied of its furniture and is no longer habitable. I give possession to its new owner to-morrow, but you will still be my guest—and in more comfortable quarters than are these at present."

Laurens thought rapidly. He had never known the Chinaman to deliberately break his word though he had twisted his meaning. Anyhow, it would be useless to refuse to go; he knew he would be carried out in that event. "I will trust to your remaining sense of honor," he returned.

"You do well, I think," was the rejoinder.

He spoke to the cloak bearer who immediately threw the garment over the young man's shoulders, and the mandarin took him by the arm. Passing through the barren hall preceded by the man with the lamp they traversed the passage to the door opening into the entrance court and there stood the

same limousine he had entered twice before. He made no resistance as he was led to the machine. Chow T'su seated himself at his side, two of the guards sat opposite, and the third took his place by the chauffeur; the curtains were pulled down and the vehicle sped on its way.

Not a word was spoken during the long ride and Laurens' thoughts were uninterrupted. He tried to figure out his whereabouts, but the curtains prevented a look outside. He was certain of only one thing and that: he had not yet reached San Francisco, as he should have done had it been his destination. There was no sound of traffic, no shuffling of feet on sidewalks, no human voices, nothing, indeed, but the very occasional honk of a horn indicating a passing automobile; even the latter finally ceased. He had nerved himself for one wild dash when the vehicle reached the city, but of a city there was not the first indication.

The road at last changed from the smooth surface over which they had been running; the machine proceeded more slowly and occasionally lurched as if on a country highway, then it labored as it went through loose sand. When it halted it had been going for nearly two hours.

Hardly had the limousine ceased moving when the

door was opened by a waiting Chinaman who bowed low before the mandarin. "Is all ready, Captain?" asked Chow T'su, in English.

"All leddy," was the low-voiced return. A few words were passed in Chinese and Laurens was handed out with almost as much deference as had been shown to his tyrant. He looked about him and saw that the machine had halted close to the waters of the bay. No habitation was in sight, but a dull glow to the east showed him that he had been taken around San Francisco by a back road and that he was now in one of the stretches of barren sand which skirt the shore. The moon, lately past its full, was just rising like a ball of blood. The waters of the bay looked black under the clear, starlit sky.

Without being told he now knew why he had been brought to the place, for his quick eye sighted a little pier jutting from the shore, a small boat swinging at its end, and less than a quarter of a mile from it lay a large schooner, its loosened fore and main sails jerking in the brisk wind. In an instant he sensed the situation. He was being taken to Chow T'su's vessel, of which he had heard him speak. And to what end? To be drowned? The Chinaman seemed to read his thoughts as readily as he had several times before.

"Water being the element of your former profession you love it, doubtless."

Laurens drew in deep breaths of the fresh air but made no answer.

The Chinaman continued: "It is the one means I have hitherto been unable to furnish you. Perhaps it will appeal to you. A single plunge, sir, and then the oblivion of Nirvana."

Still no answer.

"The honorable Laurens remains silent. Is he considering the suggestion? I will escort him aboard my yacht, which will be his home for a time. I welcome him, but I trust he will not wear out his welcome. Come."

Laurens glanced across the wide waste of sand. Could he possibly escape by running? The idea was given up as soon as formulated; he was weak and there were now five stalwart men close at hand. He had never seen one unguarded avenue of escape and he saw none now. There was no help for him, and it were as useless to beg or cry out as it would be to resist. He followed the mandarin down the pier and into the waiting boat in which there were two coolies at the oars. As he took his place astern he saw his late guards enter the limousine and watched the machine melt away into the shadow.

When later the boat swept under the stern of the schooner he caught a glimpse of her name in gilt letters, the level moonbeams bringing it out. The "*Royal Consort*" he read. And to him, familiar with things of the sea, it seemed a fitting title. The vessel's bends were clean and graceful; in her lines she looked like a racer and her length fitted the height of her towering bright-wood spars. Her sails showed like snow in the uncertain light, and her brass rail glistened.

When Laurens boarded the schooner by a set of mahogany steps he found a coolie crew drawn up to receive the master, and his first sight of the deck confirmed his impression of the elegance of the craft. He had heard of palatial yachts in San Francisco Bay—yachts owned by Chinese nabobs and manned by coolie crews, but he had never before seen one and had not credited the report. He knew it now, and felt that he was to know it to his sorrow.

Every man bowed low as Chow T'su stepped to the flawless deck. The mandarin waved his hand, the captain spoke a word in Chinese and the assembled crew dispersed. Chow T'su turned to Laurens.

"This is my captain, sir," he said, indicating the officer. "Captain Foo-Was, this is the honorable

Laurens, who is to have our especial care and respect."

The captain did not smile, but he bowed without speaking, giving the young man a glance that was anything but friendly, and went off to his duty. Chow T'su stood seriously contemplating the silent young man. "Sir," he said at last, "take your final look at your native land. You will never see it again. I assure you, sir, that for a man of sense you have less consideration for others—you are more intensely selfish than any one I ever knew. Again you are going to deprive me of my own quarters which, as my guest, I must insist on your occupying. Come, I will pay you the honors of my yacht."

Laurens bowed helplessly and hopelessly. They passed down the broad companionway and into a saloon where a table was being set. Turning from it his guide threw open a mahogany door and bowed as he waved his fat hand. "Here are your quarters, sir."

There was no gainsaying the fact that the room into which the young man entered was elegant. It was in the stern and extended the full width of the vessel, and though it was comparatively small its fittings were as luxurious as had been the apartment he had just left, and his rapid glance took in some

familiar features, the chief one being the cabinet of poisons which was set against the case of the rudder-post which came through the deck above. The side-board, or buffet, was missing, but in its place was a large wine-locker, its contents displayed through heavy glass doors.

"I will leave you to compose yourself and prepare for supper," said the Chinaman. "We will have the pleasure of each other's company on this occasion." And with that he bowed himself out with mock deference. Laurens noticed that he did not lock the door, even the key remaining inside. The fact did not encourage him; he was now more isolated than when in the mansion, so far as outside communication was concerned.

As he turned from looking at the man whom he hated with his whole soul he caught sight of himself in the only mirror he had seen for two weeks and was staggered by the change in his appearance. The hair on his temples had grown gray, and his face, which he always kept clean shaven, save for a mustache, had become pale from confinement and he bore a haggard expression in spite of the fact that his eyes were still bright and indicated an active brain. And his appearance was not improved by his dress. He was still in the evening suit he had

worn since his dinner with Josephine Dalzell, and it showed the deterioration of constant wear, while his linen was far from immaculate. That he had weakened physically was plain in the forward droop of his broad shoulders and the general laxity of his whole figure.

As he stood taking note of himself he heard the running of felted feet on the deck overhead, a few calls in Chinese, the creaking of pulleys and other familiar sounds of a vessel getting under way; then there was a gentle heeling of the craft as she fell off the wind. The *Royal Consort* had started, but to where? Laurens fancied the point to be in South America, or at least somewhere beyond the jurisdiction of the United States, but it seemed to make little difference to him; he felt that he would never be allowed to leave the schooner alive, save to plunge overboard, and yet, deep within him, was the spirit of the old adage: "While there is life there is hope."

He was very tired. He lay down on the brass bed hung with a silk valance and bolted to the deck, and it was there that Chow T'su found him when he returned to take him to supper.

The fittings of the saloon were in keeping with the general elegance of the schooner, and they were

in excellent taste. Under a stained glass skylight protected by bars to prevent damage by anything falling from aloft was a large mahogany table above which hung a bronze lamp. The table was set for but two, and as Laurens mechanically took the place indicated to him he was astonished to see that the single attendant was Mow-Sing. The youth had been stripped of his former regalia, having been degraded from the office of *majordomo* to that of a cabin boy, and his face might have been made of wood, for all expression of recognition of his former master. Laurens noticed that on his temple was a half-healed wound.

Supper was eaten in the usual silence and it was not until wine and cigars were served that Chow T'su spoke: "I have been waiting for you to express your curiosity regarding this, your last move," he said, lighting his cigar from the match held to it by Mow-Sing, who took station immediately behind his chair and stood like a statue.

"You would have waited for that as you will wait for another thing," returned the young man. "However, all things are possible. I will admit my curiosity now."

"Then I will explain. I had only been waiting to sell my house before leaving your detestable country

for Chili. My yacht has been in readiness for some time. When I learned from my young relative that you were alive and possessed the Eye of God my plans changed. I obtained the *ojimi*, but to my surprise and disgust you would not relieve me by obliterating yourself. Mark how frank I am. Shortly before the sale of my house I became aware of the activity of your friend Woodstock and freely confess that he worried me. Sir, had you been rescued I would have done that to myself which you are too cowardly to do to yourself. I would have saved my face. Let that pass.

"A few days ago I learned that through the treachery of someone who had been trusted with a knowledge of my affairs part of my plan to lead Woodstock astray had failed. The detectives had not gone to Portland on the wild goose chase I had arranged for them, and in some manner it had been intimated that you were being held in a house in Menlo Park. This quickened my pace. I broke up at once, leaving my secretary to settle small affairs, he to join me by steamer. Unfortunately my hurry obliges me to leave shorthanded as to crew; my captain, Foo-Was, having no mate."

"Yes!" returned Laurens, with assumed indifference. "And what is your present destination?"

"We go to China, sir. The ban which has long kept me from my country has been removed. As a naval man you probably recognize that we are already under way."

"I am aware of it. May I suppose that Miss Dalzell has been set free?"

"You may suppose as you please," was the slow return. "I regret that her illness prevents her joining us at supper."

"My God!" exclaimed Laurens, half rising. "Is she aboard this schooner? Are you taking her to China?"

The mandarin bowed and puffed his cigar.

"But she is no longer a menace to your safety, you devil! You once gave that as your reason for holding her!"

"You are deeply interested, are you not?" returned the mandarin, unmoved by the young man's excitement. "Are you willing to admit that you love the lady?"

"I admit it. You know it."

"I do," was the reply. "But the honorable Laurens thinks only of himself, as is usual; he should think of me. He says he loves her. He has known the lady in question, actually known her, for about two weeks, if my memory serves me. That is a mere

acquaintance. I have known her for nearly ten years. I have seen her grow from what you call a bread-and-butter Miss to a woman—a woman fit even for me.”

“God in heaven! And you are taking her **away** for your own purposes?”

“Sir, I am a man,” was the short reply.

“You are a dog, and——”

“Be careful, sir. You are being watched from the deck.” For Laurens had left his chair and stood in a threatening attitude. He glanced up. A Chinese head showed from behind a wing of the lifted skylight. He dropped back into his chair, covered his face with his hands and groaned. The mandarin smiled. “It is fitting that I now lay all my cards face up on the table,” he continued. “We will not refer to the lady again, but as for you, sir, this is my determination after mature consideration. I dare not risk offending my great ancestor’s spirit by disobeying his edict, but if you are still alive when we reach China—if you have one spark of hope remaining—I will extinguish it by delivering you over to the priests of the temple of the Eye of God. All responsibility will then be upon them, but your end will be certain, and, let me add, by no means as pleasant as the ones you have hitherto refused.”

Laurens took his hands from his face and looked in horror at the Chinaman. He was about to break into a torrent of useless vituperation when to his astonishment he saw Mow-Sing lay a finger on his lip and shake his head. The unlooked-for warning came like a dash of cold water in his face. "Let me out of your sight!" he exclaimed. "Let me go to my room!"

"With pleasure, sir," returned Chow T'su, rising and drawing back the young man's chair. "You are free to come and go as you please. You are free to the deck, sir. Hereafter I shall have the pleasure of calling on you each day, each time hoping you can no longer greet me. I bid you good-night."

With his old and maddening mock deference he escorted Laurens to his room, bowed profoundly, and retired.

CHAPTER XXI

AN INSPIRATION

NEVER had Laurens been as depressed as he was the following morning. Life itself seemed ebbing strongly. Chow T'su would win, for the young man felt that he never could stand the long voyage by sail without being mentally exhausted. And if he survived it would mean final torture at the hands of a superstitious priesthood to whom the word "mercy" had no meaning. There was no comfort to be gathered from considering either present or future, but Laurens knew one thing, and that was, he would kill the mandarin somehow before his own execution.

Like an automaton he appeared in the saloon when the gong sounded for breakfast, though he hated to meet his enemy. But Chow T'su did not appear at the table, though Captain Foo-Was took his place. He was a giant of a Chinaman with the face of his kind, and his studied ignoring of the

young man was a plain insult. He did not even look up as Laurens took his seat, but though he paid him no attention he bedeviled the subservient Mow-Sing in Chinese, the flustered boy not daring to answer.

Nor did Mow-Sing show the slightest indication of friendship for the prisoner whom he had warned the night before. Laurens had wondered what he could have meant and could find no reason for the act; neither was he surprised at the boy's present attitude toward himself; he was a Chinaman, and being one was considering only his own advantage.

The young man ate little. The sight of the big captain guzzling his food with chop-sticks, and the repulsiveness of his coarse face, disgusted him, and he abruptly left the table and went on deck, no move being made to prevent him.

It was evident that the breeze with which the schooner started had gone down in the night for the vessel was but just outside the Golden Gate when Laurens went out. He gazed longingly at the hills of the coast already blue, and though he was aware that no hand would be lifted if he leaped overboard there was an impossible stretch of water between him and the nearest land. The dying wind had little weight and the great sails were barely filled.

The sky was not blue, neither was it cloudy, and the face of the ocean was a series of long swells, their surface barely rippled by the sluggish air. To the man's experienced eye the weather had the appearance of a coming calm.

His first sight of the open sea did not move him as it would have done under different circumstances. The horror of what he had learned the night before still sat on him like a nightmare, and, save that he was innocent of all wrong, he felt like a condemned man awaiting execution. It was no longer a novel feeling to him. He was in the profoundest depths as he stood holding on to the edge of the cabin house and looking over the vast expanse like one but half awake.

And it was then, when there was no ray of hope in sight and when death had become a familiar thought, that a sudden and God-sent idea leaped into his brain—a thought that might be his salvation; and it was based upon Chow T'su's lack of faith in humanity—through his boasted belief in the selfish basis of all human motives. Why had he not thought of it before, he wondered.

But the method might not bear fruit; it might be too late, and there was a tremendous risk, though if it proved successful he could at least save the

girl from outrage at the hands of the mandarin; it might even be possible to again get the ivory ball into his own possession, and with it, through the superstition of the crew, have command of the situation. In any event, his scheme would bring on an immediate settlement between himself and Chow T'su; he would kill the mandarin if his plan failed, though it brought him death at the hands of others. He still had his pocket-knife. He would cut the fellow's fat throat, which was always exposed. What the consequences of failure would mean to the girl he put aside. In the supreme moment even she would have to be risked; worse than death faced her, as matters stood.

The very thought of having a chance changed him and he looked around like one waking from sleep. Forward the crew was lounging around in the true Chinese fashion of doing nothing without real occasion; the sea heaved, but to him its face had a new expression; the wind was rapidly going down and the sun was half obscured. A raw-boned Chinaman, really the boatswain, stood by the wheelman acting as first officer, and though Laurens knew he had been seen, the man, like the captain, ignored him, doubtless according to instructions. The spotless deck stretched unbroken save by the cabin-house

against which the young man was leaning, the masts and the galley forward. All was quiet and peaceful. An inbound steamer leaving a trail of smoke was the only vessel in sight but it was too far away to help him; and no one on its deck could have surmised that the beautiful schooner housed a coming tragedy.

Braced by the air and his new hope Laurens straightened himself, and then it came to him that if there was ever a case in which playing a part was necessary that case was his. He at once allowed his shoulders to droop again and dragged himself over to the starboard shrouds from which he looked landward as if in the deepest dejection.

And it was well that he did for a moment later Chow T'su and the captain came on deck. As the relieved boatswain passed the mandarin he made a deep bow, to which no notice was taken; the captain stood by the helmsman and looked at the sagging sails, and Chow T'su made his leisurely way to where Laurens was standing. He was dressed in a nondescript, semi-yachting costume, his silk shirt open at the throat, a white cap on his head, his queue dangling from it. Under different circumstances Laurens would have laughed at the figure he cut.

"The honorable Laurens is not looking bright this morning!" said the mandarin briskly, sending a glance over the sea and offering a cigar.

"You are discerning," was the spiritless reply. "I did not sleep well last night."

"Ah! Some deep thinking?"

"Some very deep thinking," answered Laurens, like one weary. "May—may I see Miss Dalzell?"

"On no account," was the prompt and decisive answer.

"I was afraid so. How long will the voyage be?" As he spoke the young man sank down on a coil of rope as if too tired to stand.

"For an eternity, at this rate," was the cheerful answer. "But, really, you do not contemplate finishing it—after what I told you last night!"

"Have you no mercy for a beaten man? I have cried *peccavi*."

"Not for you—and your cry is of no avail. You know of my oath to my ancestors. It cannot be withdrawn. Come! Cast yourself over."

Laurens drooped as if utterly crushed, then rose to his feet as if the act were an effort. He looked at the water lapping along the run, as though he were about to obey, Chow T'su watching him like a hawk. "I—I cannot do it—that way," he fal-

tered. "I—I cannot stand the strain. I—I will go below."

"Do so, and finish your thinking to some purpose. I will call on you shortly."

Laurens made no reply as he fairly staggered toward the companion stairs, but his heart gave a mighty leap. The time was at hand, and the matter required but little preparation. He cut a poor figure in his disordered dress, and like an aged man he felt for the rail and went down. No one was in the saloon. He wondered which of the numerous doors hid Josephine, and was tempted to try one or two, but it was a needless risk and he had none too much time for what he was about to do.

He entered his own room and locked the door. As he did so he heard dishes rattling and knew that Mow-Sing had returned to the saloon.

Then Laurens hurried, his weakened heart beating like a trip-hammer. Going to the cabinet he took out the bottle of chloral hydrate and into a wine glass from the locker he poured a teaspoonful of the colorless but powerful soporific. This glass he replaced on its rack in the locker, put back the bottle and closed the door of the cabinet. Then he went to the finely appointed desk standing under the star-board port, and folding a sheet of blank paper

placed it in an envelope which he directed to "Chow T'su, otherwise, Fung-Wang," and left it lying where it could easily be seen.

These things done the stage was set and ready for the chief actor. What would come of it? God only knew. All that remained was to put on an air of extreme dejection and wait for the curtain to rise. Seated in a chair with his head in his hands he listened for Chow T'su's coming.

He had not been in his assumed position for two minutes when he heard a rap on the panel. As he called, "Come in" in a feeble voice he remembered that he had locked the door. Going to it he threw it open, but instead of the fat mandarin facing him it was Mow-Sing. He slipped noiselessly into the room his smooth face aglow with excitement.

"You!" exclaimed Laurens.

"Speakee low down," said the boy, putting a finger to his lip. "Him killee Mow chop-chop if sabe Mow here. Me play hatee you! Me likee kill he! See!" He pointed to the scar on his temple.

"Well—for God's sake——"

"Speakee low down. You one time savee Mow-Sing; me savee you—if can do."

"You save me! You! What can you do?" demanded the astonished man.

"Not much—maybe. Me come tell you captain-man, Foo-Was, belly bad felly. You watchee. He tell Chow T'su he stickee knife in you—if say so."

"He said he would stab me?"

"Yeh-yeh. Me hear. Chow T'su he say not yet—byme by—perhaps, if no killee sef."

Laurens understood as plainly as if the words were in the most elegant English. "So the captain would kill me! Chow T'su says he is going to give me to the priests of the temple, and——"

"Me know," interrupted the youth, in a whisper as he glanced apprehensively at the closed door. "He no dare givee to pleasts. He tell captain-man pleasts take away ivly ball and keep. Chow T'su no wantee lose. Me see Flesser Woodstock. Me say——"

He stopped abruptly and stood staring at the door, stiffened by terror. For as he spoke his last word a knock sounded, an aggressive knock, and there was no doubt about its character.

CHAPTER XXII

A MATTER OF FAITH

FOR a moment both were paralyzed by the interruption, but it was the boy who first recovered and took action; before Laurens could move he dropped noiselessly to the floor and snaked himself under the bed, the hanging valance protecting him from sight. As he disappeared Laurens pulled himself together and going to the door opened it. "Come in," he said, and Chow T'su entered.

There was now no counterfeit emotion on the young man's face; he was deathly white and as he backed to the table and leaned against it he looked as if about to faint; the narrow escape of being discovered with Mow-Sing had unnerved him for the moment. The Chinaman advanced into the room, closing the door behind him.

"Something appears to be on your honorable mind," he remarked, as he looked suspiciously

around the apartment; then, seeing the open desk he walked over to it and picked up the envelope addressed to himself. "For me!" he said.

Laurens came to life then. "Sir, that is for you, but I am not quite ready to deliver it. Do not open it—yet."

"Not open it!"

"You will respect my final wish. The envelope contains a note—together with my last will."

The Chinaman tossed the paper to the desk and his face lighted. "You have come to a determination, perhaps."

"I have come to a determination—to the inevitable," returned Laurens, sinking into a chair.

"You encourage me," said Chow T'su, seating himself on the edge of the bed and looking hard at his apparently hopeless victim.

"You may take it that way," was the return. "I am where, after all, every man must come, you with the rest. I am worn down past resistance. Will you promise to give the enclosed document to the United States consul at Amoy? He is a friend of mine."

"You greatly relieve me, sir!" said the mandarin, rising from the bed and taking a chair on the opposite side of the table. "If the document you refer

to carries no reflection against myself I shall be happy to see that your wish is carried out. Is there anything more that the honorable Laurens desires?"

"May I not see Miss Dalzell for a moment before I——"

"Not for an instant. Is there anything else?"

"Nothing," was the reply. "I am broken. I could not endure the torture you have in store. It is useless to struggle. I no longer hope. I am ready. Now is as good a time as any."

"Your wisdom does you credit, though late in arriving, and your decision is more than welcome," responded the Chinaman; and there was nothing suspicious in his manner.

"Call it wisdom or weakness—it does not matter," Laurens returned. For a moment he seemed to fall into the abstraction of mental exhaustion as he stared at the floor. Presently he raised his head. "I have one other request: You will bury me at sea—with proper respect?"

"Sir," replied the Chinaman, looking fixedly at him. "Once you held the sacred relic of Confucius in your hand, and no man so favored shall have anything but respect from me. Have I not shown it? You will be wrapped in silk, Mr. Laurens, and if I had a copy of the mummery of your service I

would read it over your remains. I will drink to your passage into Nirvana, as I once promised to do. Is there anything else?"

"You will drink to your own damned success!" returned Laurens. "But I need the stimulus. I accept your offer. Express to the unfortunate lady in your power that my greatest regret is that I could not save her from a colossal brute."

Chow T'su laughed. "I will deliver your message. May I ask your method of crossing the Styx?"

"Potassium Cyanide."

"A wise choice. It is quick, cleanly and comparatively painless. It will not distort your features. You can meet your ancestors with pride. Will you act at once? I will remain and be an interested witness."

Laurens made no answer. He was afraid of overplaying his part. If it failed there was the open knife in his pocket, though it were a poor weapon against the pistol he was sure the Chinaman always carried. He got to his feet and went to the wine locker. Hope was strong within him, but failure and success were at a delicate balance; a few minutes more would determine which scale went up. Knowing that the Chinaman's narrow eyes were fol-

lowing his every movement Laurens' actions were apparently open. Taking a clean glass from the rack he stepped to the poison cabinet and poured out enough cyanide of potash to have killed ten men. This he set on the table.

Returning to the locker he opened a bottle of port and filled two glasses, *one being that which held the dose of chloral*. He did this without the least attempt at concealment, confident that from where Chow T'su sat he could not see the colorless poison. With the two glasses he advanced to the table and set the harmless wine before the mandarin, *retaining the drugged potation in his own shaking hand!* There was no pretended weakness now; he felt as if he were about to collapse. The final act was on.

"Chow T'su," he said, in a trembling voice, "I take my leave of you and place my technical murder on your black soul. I will first drink with you, then will submit to the cyanide which will relieve us both. I shall die like an American." He lifted his glass. "I drink to the God who created me, to the memory of my mother, to the girl I love. Will you join me? or will your lack of faith—your fear that your wine is poisoned—prevent that small token of magnanimity?"

The Chinaman showed his teeth in a sarcastic grin and shrugged his fat shoulders as he lifted the glass from the table and held it to his eye, as if in admiration of its color. Then he brought it slowly to his lips. Would he drink and ruin all? In his intense interest Laurens almost forgot the part he was playing.

But Chow T'su did not drink. He slowly replaced the glass on the table and looked at the young man. "You are shrewd, sir," he said, with an open sneer, "shrewd, with the shrewdness of your kind, but awkward, coarse and without true *finesse*. You evidently think I am an infant in intellect, though you should know me better by this time, and that conception of me amounts almost to an insult. Listen, sir! One small crystal of cyanide of potash, previously dropped into this glass, would allow you to triumph over me, were I to drink it. I gave you credit for more imagination. Your plan was fairly laid, had I been a fool, but you did not count on my knowledge of human nature. I read your pretended emotion, your counterfeit weakness and nervous tension. You did not deceive me for an instant. *This wine is poisoned!* And now, sir, I am ready to drink to your passage to your heaven or your hell, to your mother, and your sweetheart who will

remain in my care, as well as to the God you have doubtless called upon and called in vain. I will drink, as promised, *but it shall be from the glass you hold, and you shall drink from mine.* We will exchange, if you please." He got to his feet and held out his hand, a malicious grin of cunning on his face.

Laurens' heart almost stopped as he recognized the Providence behind him. Hesitating as if nerv-
ing himself he passed his glass to the Chinaman. "It will make no difference in the end," he said.

Chow T'su smiled more broadly as he took the proffered glass. Laurens lifted the other from the table. The two formally touched rims.

"Suspicion is the guardian of individuals as well as nations," the Chinaman remarked. "It is another name for that eternal vigilance so often quoted. I will myself prepare your next dose, if this fails. I wish you a pleasant journey. Will you drink?"

"After you."

"Together, then."

Both bowed and drank. Laurens staggered back and fell into the chair he had lately left. There was no deception in his weakness; his wondrous exaltation made him dizzy. He closed his eyes and shuddered, as though the draft was already work-

ing on him. The Chinaman stood immovable by the table, his teeth still showing in a sardonic smile.

The seconds seemed like minutes to the young man as he pretended to feel the effect of the poison the symptoms of which he was not familiar with, and during the time the unsuspecting devil looked down on him without stirring. But presently, through his half-closed eyes the writhing victim saw Chow T'su pass his hand over his shaven forehead, as if puzzled. A second or two later he probably comprehended that something was wrong with him, for he uttered a Chinese exclamation and started for the door, an unmistakable change already on his fat face. But he did not reach it. His time had come—and so had Laurens'.

CHAPTER XXIII

SUCCESS

BEFORE the mandarin was more than half way across the room the young man had leaped from his chair and was upon him. Chow T'su opened his eyes with a snap and from them shot a gleam of sudden intelligence; he evidently saw the trap into which he had fallen, but saw it too late. He made an effort to shout but Laurens clapped a hand over his thick mouth and forced him to the cushioned locker, it being now an easy matter to handle the fast-dazing man. Holding the Chinaman down he undammed the flood of his hate.

"Now, by the glory of your Confucius, you are done for!" he cried, in a hoarse whisper. "Your cursed suspicion, your eternal vigilance, your false knowledge of human nature, have been your ruin! Pull yourself together and listen to me, you viper! The wine I offered you was harmless; that which I held was dosed with chloral! I banked on your unfaith. You insisted on the exchange, as I hoped you would. You will soon be unconscious and at

my mercy. Wake up and hear me out! Don't go off yet. Wake up and—— Not on your life!" he cried, as the Chinaman tried to reach a pocket. "You are helpless, you damned snake!"

Laurens knew the man heard and comprehended, and it gave him an unholy satisfaction. He knew, too, what Chow T'su was after, but before he could get his hand on the automatic pistol the young man had gained possession of it, the mandarin being powerless to resist. Laurens shook him fiercely in order to keep him awake a moment longer while he poured venom into his deafening ear. But it was useless; the fat figure relaxed, the head fell forward, and as the young man stepped back to look at him Chow T'su fell sidewise and slipped to the floor.

Up to then the American had been in a frenzy of excitement and his late weakness seemed to turn to strength, but with the complete collapse of his enemy he suddenly calmed. Stooping over the fallen body he hurriedly went through the man's clothing, hoping to find the ivory ball, as with it in his possession he might strengthen his position, but the ball was not on his person. As he rose from his search he saw Mow-Sing on his knees beside him. "What you do?" asked the boy, his oblique eyes wide.

"I poisoned the villain. He cannot harm us now," panted Laurens.

"Him go daid?"

"I don't know, nor care. Are you going to stand by me, Mow-Sing?" As he spoke he took out the automatic.

Instead of at once answering the boy crept to the prostrate Chinaman and looked closely into the unconscious face, then he got to his feet and gave the body a vicious kick. "Him no daid. Me killee, if say so."

"No. He's safe enough. I want no killing. What will you do?"

"Me hatee him," responded the boy, with a half sob. "Me do anything for you." And he fell on his knees. "What you makee next?"

The question brought Laurens to a full sense of his situation. "I don't know what to do." And it was the truth. His plan had been carried out, but he had not thought of what lay beyond his immediate success. The boy arose to his feet.

"You waitee," he said, his mouth close to Laurens' ear, his earnest face working.

"Me sendee word Flessor Woodstock. He come. Sabe?"

"No. I don't understand."

"Me sendee word Flesser Woodstock. He come. He come with big boat, maybe. Allee same tell him 'bout big house."

Laurens' eyes widened. "You mean that you sent word to Woodstock that I was a prisoner and was being taken away on this schooner?"

The boy nodded violently. "Yeh."

"You turned against that devil! When?"

"One—two day. Told 'bout house—told 'bout ship. Me write letter, like you show me. Chow T'su, him hit Mow-Sing. Makee mad." He pointed to the Chinaman's body that was rolling back and forth with the heave of the vessel.

Laurens caught the boy's meaning and thanked God for his having versed the youth in the rudiments of writing; he also thanked heaven that Chow T'su had struck the blow which lost him a henchman. "God bless you, Mow!" he said, laying a hand on the boy's shoulder. "If ever we get out of this I'll make your fortune."

Mow-Sing caught the hand and kissed it. "If Flesser no come we no get out. If captain-man catchee Chow T'su daid, he killee you—he killee me. Him bad man!"

Laurens understood. He had rid himself of the chief, but the captain was as great, if not a greater

menace, in that he was ready to murder him at any time. Should Foo-Was discover what had happened in the cabin matters would rapidly reach a head, and he would certainly become suspicious if the mandarin was missing for long; he would be searched for, and when found, as he would be, there would come another tragedy, and one tinged with blood.

Laurens thought rapidly. If Paul Woodstock could decipher Mow-Sing's letter and learn that he was aboard the *Royal Consort* he would move heaven and earth to overtake the schooner, and the young man wondered why he had not already come to his rescue, not realizing that the authorities to which his friend would have to appeal were not keyed to a nervous tension on his account, and that certain lengths of red tape were essential in governmental actions.

One comfort was that when a rescue party once started it would not have far to go; for by the sounds penetrating the cabin the young man was aware that there was no progress being made toward open water. The vessel rolled sluggishly in the trough of the sea; there was a clattering of loose blocks overhead, and an occasional thunderous flap of the swaying mainsail. The rudder kicked violently to the swells, and the becalmed

schooner swung to and fro with the regularity of a metronome. No; they would not have to look far, if they had started.

Under the conditions Laurens realized that there was but one thing to do, and it appeared easy. He would make his position below as safe as possible until the *Royal Consort* was reached and boarded. As he stood in the room he figured how he might hold the captain and crew at bay. His first idea was to get Foo-Was into Chow T'su's room on the plea that the mandarin wished to see him, and lock him in. But he saw the plan was weak in many respects; it would end in his being obliged to deliberately kill the man, and he did not relish the idea of bloodshed; he would shed none unless absolutely necessary. To barricade and hold the saloon seemed the most feasible plan and he decided upon it.

Knowing that there must be a passage from the saloon to forward he turned to the boy, who had remained silent. "Is Foo-Was on deck?" he asked.

"Yeh."

"Is there a door at the end of the passage—a door with a lock?"

"Yeh," was the prompt answer. "Door by pantly—altee samee big bolt."

"Fasten it chop—come back chop."

"Yeh. Allee samee lock big door by companion?" The boy's quick brain had caught the idea before it was explained. "No," whispered Laurens. "I'll look to the companion doors. We must hold the cabin until Woodstock comes. Sabe?"

"Yeh." Mow-Sing was out of the room in an instant, running to the door which separated the after quarters from forward. Laurens' work was now clearly cut out. Without waiting for the boy to return he walked into the saloon and up the stairs to the deck.

It was as he had anticipated. The wind had fallen to a flat calm, but the ocean was still a series of low, unruffled swells that rolled from the west and passed under the schooner to break in thundering surf on the rocks of the California coast. By this the *Royal Consort* had drifted south of the Golden Gate, the entrance of which could not be seen. The sky was almost white, the sun murky, and the horizon appeared to have drawn in. By experience Laurens knew that the calm would not be protracted; he looked for a dazzling sun and a powerful wind from the north in less than twenty-four hours, and he hoped he would then be alive. Two or three steamers were in sight, inward bound, but they were far away and could be of no assistance to him.

Not a soul was on the quarterdeck, the steersman having deserted the useless wheel, but in the waist of the idle schooner stood Captain Foo-Was talking to his boatswain mate. Farther forward the watch on deck was lying around in the easy fashion of the Chinese sailor when not driven to action.

The captain saw the young man as he came up and stopped by the cabin doors, but he gave no sign other than a venomous glance, which was lost on Laurens, who only marked him through the tail of his eye. Presently the Chinaman swung his back to him and continued his talk with the boatswain.

The moment was auspicious. Ducking into the companion-way Laurens quickly drew the slide over the wide hatch and closed the heavy doors, bolting them, at the same time hooking the latch cover. Not without an ax or a battering-ram could entrance be made to the cabin from that direction. Running down the steps he met Mow-Sing. "Are there arms on board—pistols—guns?" he demanded of the alert boy.

"Fistol in Foo-Was place. Me know. Me inakee bed."

"Get it for yourself. Can you shoot?"

"You see—if makee."

"Good! Which is Miss Dalzell's room?"

The boy pointed to a door on the starboard side, himself running to the one opposite. Laurens rapped, but there was no answer. Again he knocked, and when there was no return a great fear clutched him. He now shook the door and guardedly called her name. At once he heard a muffled cry and a moment later the key was turned in the lock, the door thrown open, and she stood before him.

Laurens uttered an exclamation. The girl was the ghost of her old self. White and drawn she looked at him with great, gaunt eyes, then ejaculated: "Thank God! I—I thought you dead!" With that she tottered and would have fallen had he not caught her in his arms, and she was unconscious when he carried her to her bunk. He looked around. The room was fair sized but there was none of the luxurious fittings of his own quarters; it was almost perfectly bare, the only furniture being a washstand and a chair; and it was lighted by a single, round port. A door communicated with an adjoining room, and Laurens more than surmised that it was Chow T'su's cabin into which it opened. A trunk was against it, braced by the chair, and the young man quickly guessed the motive for the slight

barricade. Over the door was a narrow, ground-glass transom, closed and fastened.

Laurens could do nothing for the girl but chafe her hands, wet her forehead and wait for her to recover. Presently she opened her eyes. "Where—where is he?" she asked wildly.

"Out of the way of doing harm for the present. Why are you here and in this condition?"

"He—he was starving me," she returned, looking at Laurens in wonder.

"Starving you! For what?"

She was trembling from weakness and nervous shock. "He told me you were dead; that you had jumped overboard without—without a word."

"But why starve you to punish me?"

"No, it wasn't—that. He wanted me to be—— Oh, I cannot tell you!" And she sobbed convulsively.

"You need not tell me. I know," said Laurens; and with his love for her mingling with a great pity, he bent and kissed her on the lips. He knew, though he could not have told how he knew. He could play the part he so long wished, for there had been more than mere relief in her eyes. Like a lost child who had found its home she threw her arms around his neck and held him close, and for a moment—for

many moments, Laurens forgot the surrounding conditions. He forgot the danger hanging over them; he forgot Chow T'su, Mow-Sing, and the devil on deck, only feeling that he would now be equal to meeting anything—even death.

CHAPTER XXIV

BESIEGED

TIME passed. The two exchanged confidences, and in as few words as possible Laurens told what had been done and what were his hopes. And he learned the girl's simple story, tempered in the telling, but between her words he could read the passion of the villain who had little respect for man and none for woman. To force her to his purpose Chow T'su had been starving her. She had been taken aboard the yacht the day before Laurens came, and placed in what was practically a dungeon, and nothing save water had passed her lips for forty-eight hours. She had finally locked herself against the Chinaman, barricading the door to his room. She thought she was dying when she heard her lover's voice, and could hardly believe her senses. Laurens learned that she had been quick to catch the situation on the day Chow T'su permitted

them to meet, but why he had brought them together save to pique the girl with Laurens' indifference, an indifference which had been commanded, neither could understand. She, too, had been threatened if she indicated dissatisfaction with her position. It had been a clumsy subterfuge of the otherwise astute Chinaman. Each had been played against the other, and when the mandarin had stated that the house had been sold she was perfectly aware of what would happen—that she would be taken to China, so Chow T'su had told her, and she had fainted under the shock.

During the recital the girl clung to Laurens as a woman clings only to the man she loves, and he, at last realizing that kisses make poor food for a starving woman, was about to provide for her when Mow-Sing appeared at the door.

"He come tiffin soon—perhaps," said the boy, without seeming to notice the intimate relations of the two.

"You mean Foo-Was?" asked Laurens, starting up and realizing that his passion had made him remiss.

The boy nodded. "How do, Missy? No fear Mow-Sing. Him friend."

"A better one than I in my selfishness!" said Lau-

rens. He looked at his watch; it was nearly noon. "Can you get something to eat? Missy is starving."

"Plenty glub in pantly," was the quick return. "Me get."

He ran down the passage and before he came back Laurens grew alive to the fact that he had been a poor general and that there were two serious matters to be overcome. First, the stained glass skylight was wide open, allowing a clear view from the deck of the saloon's interior, and it could not be closed from below; not only was it a point of observation, but also one for offensive action, for though it had transverse bars they were not as heavy as Laurens wished they were. Second, that the girl could not remain in her own room; it was too small. If matters came to a fight and the crew gained access to the cabin she would be in terrible danger. Her room could not be defended as effectually as could his, which commanded a full view of the saloon as well as the passage from end to end.

Laurens had little fear that the companion-way doors would not hold against any ordinary assault, but the forward one he was far from being sure about. The skylight could not be closed, but he would remove Josephine to his own quarters and have her directly under his eye.

Taking advantage of the continued quiet he excused himself. Running from the room he tore down the curtain across the passage. He then examined the forward door, passing the pantry where Mow-Sing was engaged, and found the door was fastened by a heavy bolt, but the wood was not of the strength of that in the companion-way. If it were broken in and a rush made there would be nothing to do but fire from his own room and count on the assault being repulsed, he having reason to believe that the crew had no firearms, though each one possessed a knife.

From the passage he went to his own cabin. Chow T'su still lay where he had fallen, his fat body swaying with the motion of the vessel. He was apparently dead, but his slow, faint breathing and fluttering pulse told Laurens that he was yet alive though profoundly unconscious. With no more compunction than though the Chinaman were a bale of goods he dragged him out; his door, next to Josephine's, was locked, and without stopping to search for the key and examine his berth Laurens hauled him to the further end of the passage, depositing the ponderous body against the dangerous door, its bulk helping to barricade it. A few minutes later he had the girl in his own room and saw her eating the food

Mow-Sing had brought. So far as provisions were concerned they might stand a siege of many days.

Though relieved of one great load Laurens had taken on another, and the tension of his nerves was even more pronounced because of the nearness of a new crisis. It was now well past noon and nothing had happened; the companion-way doors had not even been tried. The calm of the elements still prevailed; the vessel swayed to and fro with monotonous regularity, the blocks rattled, the rudder kicked spasmodically, and the woodwork creaked.

It was with a mingling of feelings that Laurens walked up and down the room, one eye on Josephine, who was visibly stronger after a glass of wine, the other on the open skylight. Save for the complaints from the racked vessel there were no other sounds, and the absence of them seemed portentous to the man.

The girl, released from a terrible danger, became buoyant instead of being depressed, the contrast between her late and her present position acting as a tonic, and her boundless faith in the ability of her lover to protect her kept her from realizing the uncertainty that tightened the nerves of Laurens and held his spirits in check. If Mow-Sing, who was now crouched on the top step of the companion

stairs, revolver in hand, had any doubts regarding the future, he kept them to himself.

The minutes dragged. It grew to be one o'clock, and the fact that tiffin hour had been passed and no notice taken of it, troubled Laurens. But he was ready. He had examined both the automatic, and the revolver taken from the captain's room, determined not to be the victim of another false cartridge. He found the weapons perfect and fully loaded, but wished he had more than the fifteen shots both contained.

He was becoming as nervous as a hysterical woman, being sure that those on deck had somehow become alive to the situation below. He drank a glass of wine and smoked a cigar, but could eat nothing. He had become sure that something would soon happen to break the damnable suspense and permit definite action.

And something did happen.

He had stepped out into the saloon and was about to speak to Mow-Sing when he heard the companion-way door tried, then it was shaken and afterward kicked upon. Laurens beckoned to the boy and they both took station behind the trunk of the mainmast which came through the deck at the head of the passage. From that position they had perfect command

of the companion-way door and the entire length of the skylight. As they stood there the girl appeared, but Laurens laid a finger on his lip and motioned her back. She instantly obeyed and had hardly retired when the skylight opening showed the head of Captain Foo-Was. He looked down and on seeing the apparently empty saloon he shouted in Chinese through the opening. Receiving no answer he went away, and again silence fell. But it was only for a moment. The silent watchers heard the passage door being tried, and a minute later the head of Foo-Was again appeared at the skylight. Now he shouted, calling for Mow-Sing.

Laurens knew that whatever might happen nothing would be gained by keeping the captain in the dark; if he was not warned he would certainly chop his way into the saloon. "Does Foo-Was understand English?" he whispered to the boy at his side.

"Only little pidgin," was the low return. "First time in 'Melica."

"Then tell him that his master, Chow-T'su, is dead; that he cannot come down. Tell him I boss the cabin and will shoot the first man who tries to break in. Sabe?"

The boy evidently understood, for he nodded and began shouting in a sing-song absolutely unintelligible

to Laurens but having a decided effect on Foo-Was, who looked as astonished as a Chinaman can. As the boy ceased, his words were taken up by the captain and repeated to the crew, who evidently stood near. A great jabbering was the result and several heads appeared at the opening, but they were instantly withdrawn.

"What did you say?" asked Laurens.

"Allee samee what you tell. Say Chow T'su go daid. Say you got ivly ball. Say you makee me servant man." Mow-Sing grinned as he spoke.

"You were fairly accurate, except for——"

He was stopped by the reappearance of the captain's head. Foo-Was hurled a volley of words below. Mow-Sing spoke in return, and there was a cross-fire of questions and answers. The boy's last remark was very short.

"Well?" said Laurens, when the captain withdrew.

"Him say no believe. Allee same big lie. He say you damn *yang kueitsu*—allee samee foreign-devil. Say he killee you—he killee me—if no open door."

"Ah! And what did you tell him?"

"Tellee go hell."

Mow-Sing spoke with perfect seriousness, and in

spite of the situation Laurens laughed for the first time in days. He realized the faithfulness of the boy who stood by him and against his own countrymen, and he swore to himself that if Providence permitted him to get from his present coil, such devotion would receive a rich reward. "Can they shoot?" he asked, as the clamor on deck again began.

"No 'volvers. Chinaman no likee fistol. Got knife."

"Then we are safe!" exclaimed Laurens. "Will Woodstock never come!"

"Him come," returned the boy, confidently. "Melican yaman slow. Flessen say damn. Melican yaman hurry. Send big boat soon."

Laurens understood the reference to the law's delay, and the words comforted him though he feared a reverse of fortune before Woodstock arrived. He knew the cabin would be attacked, and that, soon, but was in the dark as to which point.

He did not wonder long. After a short interval of silence there was a sudden renewal of the shouts on deck, as if the crew were applauding some speech, and almost immediately the wings of the skylight were lowered. Hardly had they settled into place when the whole affair was beaten in, the fragments of stained glass flying into the saloon in a shower;

a moment later the work of art lay scattered on the floor and nothing but the bars opposed entrance from overhead.

Laurens saw that Foo-Was was at least a man of action, though he wondered what such an apparently useless movement could mean. He raised his pistol to fire a warning shot at the first head that should appear and meddle with the remaining protection, but no target presented itself and he soon learned that the Chinese captain, beside being a man of action was one of resource. After a deal of jabbering a spar appeared over the opening, its end being lowered to engage the bars, and then came a word of command. In an instant the powerful lever tore out both bars and frame, and with their going went the hope of holding the cabin, there now being nothing to prevent a dozen men from leaping through the gaping hole.

Laurens had hardly grasped the full meaning of this unforeseen disaster when he heard an assault on the forward door and became aware that from where he stood he was menaced from both front and rear; his position had become critical, and to remain where he was meant ruin.

Catching Mow-Sing by the arm he ran across the cabin and into his own room in order that from his

door he would have his enemies in front. It would be his last stand.

The girl was sitting on the edge of the bed, her hands over her heart, her eyes wide with excitement, but if she were frightened she did not show it by either screaming or by questions; she only looked at Laurens enquiringly and he smiled in an effort to reassure her, but it was a feeble smile and one which would not have deceived a child. "We can hold them," was all he said in comfort, as he swung around and faced the open door. Mow-Sing had crouched against the lintel, his cocked revolver pointed toward the saloon. And thus they waited.

Laurens concluded that for strategic reasons no assault would come through the skylight until the passage door had been broken down and a rush made from practically two directions, and by the regular and heavy strokes of what seemed to him a spar used as a ram, he knew that it would soon be accomplished.

Finally it went, and as it collapsed with a crash and splintered, it half jammed against the body of the unconscious Chow T'su and prevented a clear opening. As two or three men squeezed through and rushed down the passage Laurens fired. He saw the first man fall, and as Mow-Sing let go a shot the

others turned and ran back to safety, standing beyond the opening and yelling as only excited Chinamen can yell.

But if Laurens thought he had repulsed the invaders for good he was mistaken. The shots and the shouting appeared to act as a signal to those on deck, for hardly had the American recovered from the stunning effect of the explosions in close quarters when he saw three men leap through the skylight. As they struck the table, sending the broken glass flying, he marked that each man had a club in his hand and a knife in his teeth.

Instantly he fired at the trio, and heard the boy's revolver bark at the same moment. He saw one coolie drop and roll to the floor; he saw another sink to the table; the third man appeared uninjured, and as Laurens covered him and again pressed the trigger, he saw another batch leap down from the deck. Both he and Mow-Sing fired again and again, not stopping to mark results, then both the defenders became aware that the passage was filled with others bearing down on them.

Knowing that in an instant he would be overwhelmed by numbers Laurens hauled the boy back into the room and slammed the door, bolting it just as the devils outside reached it. In a moment he

had piled against it every piece of movable furniture in the cabin, and at length stood panting in the middle of the room and awaiting the last act. Josephine had thrown herself on the bed and lay still, her face buried in her hands.

After a few thumps on the heavy door the attack ceased, but to those in the cabin the fact brought little hope; it was only an interim until something effective could be brought to bear on the obstruction. In the ensuing silence—a silence so profound that it was worse than the late bedlam, Laurens and Mow-Sing stood waiting, and the wait was so long that they became puzzled at it. Hoping against hope, he stepped to a port and looked out. Nothing but the rolling sea and white sky were visible, the drifting schooner having swung so that not even the coast could be seen. He turned and spoke for the first time to the girl who still lay in an attitude of despair. He knew that with his final defeat her fate would be worse than his, and his would be bad enough.

“Josephine,” he said. The girl lifted her head and looked at him, and there was a strange expression in her eyes. “This is the end,” she returned, but not at all wildly. “What were you going to say?”

"Nothing, but to tell you what I fear. We are driven into a corner, and——"

"I know—I know," she interrupted. "And I am useless. You need not tell me the rest. How many shots have you left?"

"A dozen between us, perhaps. I think——"

"Save one—for me—at the end. Kiss me now, John—and promise."

Laurens was staggered. "Do you mean it?"

"Would it not be the best way? I would rather die than face those outside. You will promise?"

He did not answer, for just then he heard a blow on the deck above him and by its character he knew what was coming. The stroke was that of an ax; they were cutting through the deck, and at the same moment a similar assault began on the door. To Laurens the end was at hand. Stepping to Mow-Sing he said: "They will get us, my lad. If I am killed first, you shoot Missy. Sabe?"

Mow-Sing looked at him, his eyes winking fast. "You die for Missy?"

"Yes."

"No have to—perhaps."

"What do you mean?"

"Mow-Sing, him go out. Say killee me—let you

and gal go. You savee me once; Mow-Sing savee you, perhaps."

"Sacrifice yourself for me? Not by a damned sight!" returned Laurens, touched by the boy's devotion. "It would be a useless attempt, anyway! No, we'll save ourselves by dying Chinese fashion! There's enough poison here to finish us all! I'll have it ready. But I'll send some one to hell with my last bullet!"

Tearing open the door of the cabinet he took out the bottle of cyanide and was about to pour three doses into as many wine glasses when he was brought to a stop by Mow-Sing shouting:

"You see! You see! Look! Look!" He was dancing and pointing to a port. Laurens dropped the poison and ran to the round opening, and at the same moment the chopping on deck ceased. What he saw lifted his spirits and set his blood on fire. A United States cruiser lay across the stern of the schooner. It was less than a quarter of a mile away and had come into sight immediately after he had looked out a few minutes before. But it was not that alone which set his blood bounding; it was the large launch which had put from the side of the war vessel and which he could plainly see was filled with men. With a white bone in its teeth it came

tearing over the swells, straight toward the schooner, and Laurens felt that they were saved. He did not stop to wonder how it was that an American war vessel, evidently from sea, could know of his dilemma and come to his rescue; he only knew the fact, and the sudden reversal of fortune made him act like one demented. Catching the girl in his arms he covered her face with kisses. He could not speak. He pointed to the open port and his long overstrained nerves gave out as between laughing and crying he tried to explain.

But his justifiable weakness was only temporary. He soon realized that the assault on the door had also stopped and that the shouts on deck had been followed by a scuffling of feet and then by the old, uncertain silence. He waited, but the wait seemed hours long, and at last he heard a thumping on the companion doors. It was followed by a voice—a voice in good, sound English.

“The cabin, ahoy! Mr. Laurens, are you below?”

With an answering yell he and the boy tore away the barricade, threw open the door and rushed into the saloon. The floor seemed covered with men, and an officer in uniform was looking down through the demolished skylight.

It took Laurens but a moment to get on deck. At a glance he saw the launch fast to the starboard chain-plates, and forward were huddled Captain Foo-Was and what was left of the Chinese crew, held there by six armed marines. The officer who had hailed him came forward with extended hand.

"We seemed to have arrived in time to interrupt some sort of a circus!" he said, smiling. "I am Lieutenant Homer, of the United States cruiser *Connecticut*. You look to have had rather a strenuous life, sir!" He glanced at the other's shabby evening clothes.

"Thank God for your coming!" returned Laurens, effusively shaking the proffered hand. "An hour later and you would have probably been useless, so far as I am concerned. Is Professor Woodstock aboard you? But, of course not! I'm fairly muddled."

"I don't know who you mean, sir," returned the officer. "Coming along the coast from Chili we picked up a wireless to look out for the schooner *Royal Consort*, rescue Lieutenant Laurens, arrest all Chinamen on board and bring the vessel to San Francisco. From what my captain told me I gathered that there was another party out in search of you. We were not certain that this was the craft

indicated until the launch neared her. When I saw her name and a Chinese crew chopping the deck I boarded prepared for trouble. There was not much resistance. I presume you are the party we want, and you look as if you might have a story to tell."

"I am here—what is left of me," returned Laurens. "As for a story—— Come below and I will show you a sight."

They went down. Four dead Chinamen and one badly wounded lay on the cabin floor, and three more were in the passage. Chow T'su, still alive and still unconscious, was dragged into the light. At sight of the ghastly array the officer whistled. "All this your work, Mr. Laurens?"

"Mine and the boy's, sir," returned Laurens, patting Mow-Sing on the shoulder.

"My orders to arrest all Chinamen must include him, I fear."

Laurens flared, then laughed. "I don't think you will include him after hearing my story, sir. Come into the cabin; there is a lady in this case."

They went into the disordered room, and after introducing the officer to the half hysterical Josephine, who was at first taken to be a Chinese woman, Laurens gave a brief account of the tragedy. "And now, sir, what will you do about the boy? To herd

him forward with the crew would mean his death; they would tear him to pieces."

"I think I can leave him to you," was the hearty return, "and I think that you and Miss Dalzell had better return to the *Connecticut* with me."

"And I think not," was the decisive rejoinder. "Miss Dalzell will, of course, decide for herself, but here she will be no curiosity to numberless eyes. The danger has passed and on the schooner she will have every comfort. As for myself, I shall remain aboard the *Royal Consort*. Chow T'su cannot be easily transhipped in his present condition, and I do not care to lose sight of him while he is alive."

"You are your own master, of course," was the polite return. "I will clear the dead from the cabin; as for the rest, I must first report to the commanding officer. He will probably send the surgeon, and a few more men to guard the crew. I cannot—— Well?" He addressed the marine who entered and saluted.

"A revenue cutter out o' the Gate, coming alongside, sir," said the man. "Looks to be jammed with people."

Laurens jumped to his feet. "Woodstock, by all that's holy!" he cried, and ran to the deck.

CHAPTER XXV

A CORNERED RAT.

TWO hours later the *Royal Consort*, in tow of the revenue cutter, was forging toward San Francisco. Chow T'su's room had been broken into, his ponderous body deposited in his bunk, and the *Connecticut's* surgeon had just departed in a launch.

"It is nip and tuck with him," the doctor had said, after examining the eyes of the unconscious mandarin. "But if he don't die he will recover and be himself—entirely himself, in a few hours. He had an enormous dose. There is little I can do at present." And he had gone off.

Laurens had searched the room quietly and discovered the ivory ball in the Chinaman's luggage. Dizzy with fatigue he had shown the stone to his astonished friend, and told his story, hitting only the high places. Woodstock had listened but had said little as he marked the condition of the man.

"I, too, have something of a yarn which will interest you, but I won't inflict you with it now," he said.

"I have grown old over this matter, and when I finally hit your trail through the most remarkable letter I ever received, I thought the authorities would never move. We got to the house in Menlo Park too late—— But you've had enough for one day. You'd better rest or you'll collapse."

Laurens had gone to a spare room and, dressed as he was, fell into a heavy slumber. Josephine remained in the after cabin and was also asleep, the doctor having given her something to quiet her. Mow-Sing was curled up in the pantry, and Woodstock sat on deck, the prisoners having been taken aboard the cutter, no one but the helmsman being in sight. In the cabin not a soul was awake but the marine stationed at the door of Chow T'su's room.

It was early morning when Laurens was brought to his senses by Mow-Sing shaking him. "Chow T'su—him wake up," said the boy. "Flesser want see you."

Laurens felt refreshed. He jumped from his bunk and went into the saloon, where he found Woodstock waiting for him. "Sorry to disturb you, old man," he greeted, "but the devil has come to his senses. He must have the stomach of a goat to

throw off that dose so soon. I looked in and saw him."

"How is he?"

"Weak, but otherwise normal, I fancy. He has the eyes of a snake with a broken back. I have reason to think we had better have him out before reaching port. I have something to tell him that I wish you to hear. The man's fat is in the fire in more ways than one. I wish I might dictate as to his disposal."

"I wish you might," returned Laurens. "I confess I would not know what to do with him. I leave it to the law." He turned to the marine. "Bring him in. Watch him like a cat; he's a treacherous beast."

The man saluted and went to the Chinaman's door. Presently Chow T'su stalked into the saloon. To Laurens' astonishment he seemed but little the worse for wear, perhaps because of the gorgeous gown of his order which he had put on, now being in full regalia, even to the buttoned cap denoting his rank. He was smoking a cigarette and to all appearances had entirely recovered from the effects of his dose of chloral. But he was not the same as he had been; his pallor was intense, his lips were compressed, and his slit-like eyes were barely open.

Laurens bowed mockingly, a salute which was not returned.

With something of his former dignity, but more of an insulting confidence in himself, Chow T'su walked to a chair by the table, seated himself without invitation, crossed his legs and blew a cloud of smoke toward the open skylight, at the same time throwing a contemptuous glance at his former prisoner. At that moment Mow-Sing came in. As he saw him the mandarin's eyes opened and something like a flash was emitted. The boy cringed and edged toward Laurens, but the Chinaman did not offer to speak; he did not even look at Woodstock or the marine.

It was Laurens who broke the silence. "I trust you have had a comfortable nap," he began.

"The honorable Laurens is pleased to be ironical," was the return, in the old, smooth tone.

"Not at all! I would only remind you that Confucius says: 'No needle is sharp' at both ends!'"

The Chinaman stiffened perceptibly as he took a puff at his cigarette. "You are trite, sir. You lowered yourself to traducing my servant."

"I beg your distinguished pardon," returned Laurens. "The initiative was his. You drove him from you by your cruelty. I have studied your Confucius

well. He states that a distant relative is of less value than a near friend."

Chow T'su threw his cigarette to the floor and shifted uneasily. "You think you can afford to smile," he returned.

"Yes! 'If fortune smiles, who does not?' Confucius again!"

"Is it part of your ethics to bait a prisoner?" demanded Chow T'su, with his first flash of temper.

"Say, rather, an honored guest. You may thank me that you are not an inmate of a United States cruiser's brig. I am responsible for you. Is there anything of which my charge complains?" Laurens was filled with an ugly joy as Chow T'su winced on being reminded of his own words under different circumstances.

"Sir," he returned, "I think our differences are now well balanced. You are clear, though brutal. I have studied our case, and——"

Laurens interrupted: "I have it from your Confucius that some study usually shows the need of more. Can I enlighten you in any way, my friend?" He spoke as blandly as Chow T'su had ever done.

"You might tell me what your intentions are," was the quick return.

"Well," said Laurens, "I do not thirst for your

life, even at your own hands, as you did for mine; but considering the boasted length of your arm I shall never consent to your freedom. Have you anything to propose? If you insist, I might give you a knife, or a rope, and there is always a razor—or there are still things in the cabinet, if you desire something more speedy. Forgive me these details; you have forced me to appear discourteous to a guest.”

The badgered Chinaman evidently remembered his own words. He bit his lip before answering.

“My arrest was not legal. I was beyond the three-mile limit of your country’s jurisdiction——”

“You certainly are within it now,” interrupted Laurens. “But what were you about to remark?”

“That we compromise this matter. I will waive all claim to everything if you will return my relative, Mow-Sing, to me. I will even pay you for——”

“Not on your miserable life!” answered Laurens, hotly. “There is not that much money in the world.”

“I shall appeal to the Chinese minister, sir.”

“Not after I’m through with you,” put in Woodstock, speaking for the first time.

The Chinaman ignored him, but the archæologist advanced to the table and struck it sharply with his knuckles to command attention. “You will alter

your superior air in a moment, sir," he said, speaking slowly and clearly. "My friend here, whom you have more than outraged, has said that, outside the law, he would be in a quandary as to what to do with you."

"Yes?" returned the Chinaman, producing and lighting another cigarette. "He may well be, having been treated with the greatest distinction."

"But I am in no doubt," snapped Woodstock. "I have but lately returned from China. You have an axiom there that the tallest towers fall hardest and make the greatest ruin. Sir, you will soon alter your insolent attitude. Listen attentively. You are Chow T'su, of the house of the Flying Dragon, an upper-class family, but poor. Do you remember how Formosa was lost to China?"

Chow T'su's jaw fell and his narrow eyes snapped open, but he made no reply. Woodstock went on: "When you saw the strength of Japan and knew that its aim was to get Formosa, in order to expand, and that it would probably be successful in overcoming the opposition of your government, you secretly cast your lot with them, little dreaming at the time that the Dowager Empress would ever return to power. For the services of your brother and yourself you were granted large estates on that island

and you put your miserable soul into gathering yen, by a method of extortion, from your tenants. You finally sold your grants for an immense sum. You returned to China enormously wealthy and, being educated, you were made a mandarin by the throne you had hoodwinked. Am I not right, so far?"

There was no answer. The Chinaman only stared at the professor. The scientist went on: "But you are not wholly a fraud. Conservatism is the curse of your country, and undoubtedly your worship of the Confucian relic was genuine, else you would never have endured the hardships and degradation to which you submitted. To you it brought its curse, if it has any. Immediately after its loss you disappeared from China, a victim to your fanaticism. Not until two days ago did I learn of these passages in your life."

"From whom?" asked the Chinaman, attempting to hide his intense interest.

"From your confidential secretary, Mr. Kimeo," answered Woodstock. "Listen a moment longer," he continued, as Chow T'su was about to speak. "Through a letter from your mistreated *majordomo*—also a member of the house of the Flying Dragon, I discovered where you had imprisoned Mr. Laurens and Miss Dalzell, and I notified the police. With

a force I went to your house and found you and your victims were gone, but we rounded up your remaining household, among them your precious secretary, who is a renegade Jap, as you are a traitorous Chinaman. He is a coward. He broke down under close questioning, and confessed the whole business—your antecedents, your political position, and your motive and manner of beguiling Miss Dalzell and Mr. Laurens into your power.”

Laurens listened in amazement but did not interrupt. Woodstock paused a moment. Chow T'su looked stupidly at him, his half-consumed cigarette dropping from his fingers.

“Sir,” went on the professor, “you had no intention of returning to China—you dared not. This schooner, loaded with your household effects, was cleared for Valparaiso, where you hoped to settle and live a life of grandeur. You are perfectly aware there are no priests of the temple of the Eye of God—that the order has been dissolved for nearly ten years, after the temple was destroyed during the Boxer riots. You intended having Mr. Laurens murdered before reaching Valparaiso, if he did not commit suicide before. You intended to force Miss Dalzell into disreputable relations with yourself. So

confessed your secretary, and I believe him, for his story fits your character.

"And now, sir, for your disposition. If the authorities do not send you to prison for twenty years it will be because the Chinese minister will insist on your being deported to your own country, where the Dowager Empress will doubtless welcome you as she welcomed your brother, who lost his head within six hours after appearing in court. Did you not know that? Have you anything to say?"

The Chinaman could not reply; certainly he did not. With Woodstock's reference to his being deported the last of his arrogant air departed; his head fell forward and he was apparently staring at a vision in the glass-scored mahogany table, his fat face suddenly drawn.

"What is it?" asked Laurens, struck by the abject wretchedness of the man.

"Let me—let—me—alone," was the scarcely audible reply. A moment later the fallen Chinaman seemed to come to a sense of his surroundings. He straightened himself, got unsteadily to his feet, and like a man recovering from a blow, but still with a feeble effort at pride, he walked into his room and closed the door.

CHAPTER XXVI

SAVING HIS FACE

IT was growing dusk and the *Royal Consort* had dropped her anchor off the Customs Dock in San Francisco. Mow-Sing had been at once dispatched to Laurens' apartment for clothing, and that gentleman, feeling something like his old self, was sitting under the rigged awning on the vessel's quarter-deck with Josephine. Woodstock had gone ashore to attend to some government formality and they were awaiting his return.

"It is a quiet ending for such a wild beginning," remarked the young girl, who, though still in her Oriental costume, made an entrancing picture, despite her worn expression. She gazed pensively at the lights of the city.

" 'I never knew so foul and fair a day,' " quoted Laurens. "I think we are alone together for the first time since we met in the conservatory. I would like to act, but propriety forbids; there are eyes for-

ward. You say I saved your life? Granted, for the sake of argument. When am I to receive my reward?"

The girl turned to him, and her eyes were wonderful. "Oh, my dear—my dear," she said, with an abandon that astonished him. "I have brought you nothing but trouble since we met. Do you wish to be rewarded by more?"

"Josephine," he returned, taking her hand; "in spite of his injustice Chow T'su has taught me a lesson. I shall no longer be useless and self-sufficient. I have an object in life—which is to welcome trouble—when it arrives in the form you put it. When shall it come?"

She was about to answer, but the officer who had charge of the marines appeared from the saloon and went up to them.

"Mr. Laurens, the steward reports that something is wrong in the Chinaman's cabin. He cannot get in to serve supper, and neither he, nor the guard, nor myself can get an answer from him."

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know, sir. The prisoner sent for Mow-Sing an hour ago, and I let the boy see him for five minutes, in my presence. They spoke in Chinese."

Laurens leaped to his feet.

"Break down the door, sir. Dollars to cents he has made away with himself!"

Josephine turned white and shivered, and at that moment the deck was hailed by Woodstock, who was returning with a couple of police officials. Laurens explained his fear and the men hurried below.

The guards, of which there had been two since the Chinaman's recovery, maintained they had heard nothing unusual since the boy left the room. They had seen Mow-Sing go into the room next the prisoner's, but he had not stayed there more than a minute. They had not seen him since.

There was nothing to be done but break down the door, and the marine's heavy shoulders soon tore it from its fastenings. Laurens did not have to step in to see what had happened. Chow T'su lay on his back on the floor. He was quite dead, and one glance at him showed how he had caused his own terrible end.

"*Hiri-kiri!*" exclaimed Laurens. "How did he get the knife? Find Mow-Sing, someone."

But no search was necessary. At the call of his name the Chinese boy seemed to slip through the legs of the assembled group. He fell on his knees before Laurens.

"Me givee knife!" he cried hysterically. "He

tell Mow he killee him—he folly him hundled years—he folly you hundled years—if me no catchee knife and give. If he gettee knife he no killee any mans. Me catchee knife—me push over transolm in Missy room. Mow-Sing run away. Now you safe—Mow safe!”

“You were afraid of him, got the knife and pushed it over the transom of the next room?” asked Laurens.

“Yeh.”

“You poor little duffer! I cannot blame you. You were in more danger than I!”

Later, as he went on deck, the girl leaned forward with inquiring eyes.

“Well, he has saved his face,” said Laurens.

And she understood.

* * * * *

Locked securely in a safe-deposit vault in New York is the ivory ball, and once in a long time Laurens exhibits it to some deeply interested archæologist. He considers it as belonging to his wife, but she refuses all title to it.

When he happens to speak of the thing Josephine shudders. And then he tells her that the evil influ-

ence of the *ojimi* with its priceless stone must have been dissipated, as it had certainly brought the best of luck to him.

At which she smiles again.

END

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